RUTH FIELDING AT CAMERON HALL

ALICE B. EMERSON

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THE DRIVER'S SEAT WAS EMPTY.

Ruth Fielding at Cameron Hall

OR

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING AT COLLEGE," "RUTH FIELDING AND HER GREAT SCENARIO," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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BY ALICE B. EMERSON

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RUTH FIELDING AT CAMERON HALL

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RUTH FIELDING AT CAMERON HALL

CHAPTER I

READY, SHOOT!

"THERE she is! That girl in the blue sweater is Ruth Fielding!"

"You mean the one giving orders through the megaphone? She looks too young to be a moving picture director."

"Ruth Fielding won a fifty-thousand-dollar prize in an international scenario contest, just the same," broke in a third voice, low pitched and intense, "and she was asked to supervise the filming of the picture herself. They're shooting one of the big scenes to-day. We were lucky to get passes."

The three girls who engaged in the half-whispered conversation at the edge of the Fielding Film Company lot, gripped their precious passes more tightly, and focused their eyes as one upon the scene before them.

Save for the huge electric lights which reenforced the natural sunlight, the artificial rocks, half-built houses, and the array of cameras, the girls might have been looking into the very heart of a tiny fishing village. Their attention centered upon an old church with towering steeple.

The girls' interest in the scene was typical of that of hundreds of curious persons who each year visited Ruth Fielding's Hollywood studio. So intent were the visitors in watching the movements of the slender figure in blue that they failed to notice that they, too, were under observation by a fourth person who was seated upon a bench a short distance away.

"Miss Fielding owns her own company and finances it herself," the conversation went on. "Isn't she lucky? Wish I were in her shoes!"

"Lucky? It's brains and pluck! I consider it a privilege just to say we went to the same college she did, even if she graduated before we entered."

"Anyway, mentioning we were Ardmore College girls got us our passes," came the chuckle. "Not many visitors are allowed here while they're filming the important scenes. See! They've roped off the village to keep folks from getting in front of the camera."

The three girls relapsed into silence and watched the activity. Ruth Fielding, megaphone

in hand, was giving the scene a last careful survey. She was absorbed in her work and did not glance in the direction of the visitors.

The action for the picture had been rehearsed. Ruth was ready to signal to the cameramen. She turned to the star with final instructions. Her voice was pitched low, but was curt and business-like.

"Remember, keep your face turned this way, Miss Brown! Register fear. A storm is approaching—you're afraid your sweetheart will never reach the harbor. Ready, Markham! Start the propeller! All right, cameras!"

As Ruth nodded her head in his direction, Jack Markham, a young aviator-actor, quickly obeyed orders. With the help of an extra, he started the propeller of a small airplane which stood just out of range of the cameras. As the engine began its steady and deafening roar, a small hurricane struck the artificial village.

Ruth did not attempt to shout above the noise of the engine, but signaled for the action to begin. She stood quietly at the side of one of the cameramen and watched the actress critically. As the cameras ground on, Ruth smiled with satisfaction, for Miss Brown was throwing herself heart and soul into her part.

As she had been instructed, Miss Brown looked beyond the airplane, apparently out toward an

imaginary sea. She walked slowly forward, nearer and nearer the revolving propeller.

Ruth watched her anxiously, for the safety of her company always came ahead of her picture.

"Not too close!" she warned through the megaphone.

The actress did not hear. She was keyed up to the emotion she was portraying, and the wind from the propeller seemed only to add to the realism and not to warn her of the danger.

Ruth Fielding was distinguished for her ability to think fast. She realized only too well that to break the scene would mean a delay and a money loss, yet to continue it endangered the life of the actress.

Deliberately, Ruth motioned Markham to turn off the engine of the airplane. He responded instantly, for he, too, had watched with alarm the approach of Miss Brown to the whirling propeller. The cameramen ceased their work.

As the wind suddenly died down, Miss Brown turned toward Ruth and a look of wonder and surprise came over her face. For the first time, she realized that she had been in danger of walking into the propeller. The actors and cameramen could not help but laugh at the young girl's expression. Danger avoided was soon forgotten. It was all a part of the day's work.

"Your acting was wonderful," Ruth assured

her heartily; "but I was afraid you would be hurt." She glanced at her watch. "We've all had a hard day and are pretty tired. We'll not work any more until to-morrow."

The actors and actresses moved away toward the dressing rooms, but Ruth remained to give final directions to the workmen and Markham, the aviator. Presently she turned toward a near-by bench where another girl was seated. The serious expression left Ruth's face as she greeted her lifelong chum, Helen Cameron.

"Think I'd never get through?" she demanded. "You've stuck around all afternoon, haven't you?"

"I didn't mind waiting. But you look tired enough to drop."

"I think I will. Right now." Ruth laughed, and sat down on the bench beside Helen. "Did the scene bore you?"

"I should say not! Honestly, my hair stood right on end for a minute! If I get a thrill like that every day, I'll lose weight."

"That's an idea, Helen! Maybe I can use it in advertising. How would this sound? 'See the latest Fielding picture! Guaranteed to reduce——' "

"Pounds or money?" Helen, with a provoking grin, interrupted. "Never mind, Ruthie," she added soothingly. "I admire the way you can

give orders. I never could boss a man and get away with it."

"Seems to me you make Chess Copley step around pretty lively," Ruth remarked dryly.

"Oh, Chess—" Helen glanced down at her engagement ring. "That's different. Anyway, he likes it."

"I'd laugh if he heard you say that."

While Ruth was speaking, her eyes were upon the fishing village set and her mind continued to dwell on the day's work. Helen noticed her expression.

"I guess you're in love with your work, Ruth Fielding. Perhaps more deeply than with my brother!"

Ruth aroused herself with an effort and shook her head emphatically.

"You know better than that, Helen. I'm just out of sorts to-day, and poor company. Seems as though one thing after another goes wrong, and every delay means additional expense."

"I know, Ruthie dear." Helen, instantly sorry she had offered the unpleasant suggestion, slipped an arm about her chum. "If I were you I wouldn't worry about the cost of this picture. Can't you spend as much as you like?"

"Yes, when I won the scenario contest and was asked to supervise the filming, I was given ample funds. Just the same, I must give an account

of how I have spent the money, and it's a matter of pride to make every cent count."

"That's the tiny streak of Uncle Jabez Potter in you, Ruthie! But I don't blame you. And your picture is great! It will be the biggest thing ever produced in this country, unless I miss my guess!"

"I hope you're right. It ought to be great, after all the trouble I had winning that international scenario contest."

"You mean, after all the trouble you had trying to keep Dean Hollister from winning the contest with the ideas he stole from you."

Both girls smiled as they recalled the incidents connected with the theft and how Fred Orman, a down-and-out young movie actor, had aided in the recovery of the manuscript.

Ruth and Helen turned to face Helen's twin brother, Tom Cameron, who had slipped up behind them. His friend, Chess Copley, was close at his heels.

"Ruth," Tom went on, assuming a mock-serious expression, "I've just come from the projection room, and there's a flaw in one of your love scenes."

"What?" Ruth failed to note the twinkle in Tom's eye.

"Absolutely. Your actor doesn't know how to make love. Let me show you how it should be

done." With a glance at Chess, Tom sat down on the bench and slipped his arm around Ruth.

"Tom, you villain." Ruth edged away. "Just because we're engaged—" Her voice trailed off.

"Can't I even look at you? You work all the time now, so I can't expect to talk to you," Tom grumbled. "As soon as this picture is out of the way, you've got to take a rest, Ruth."

"Where are you folks going this year?" Chess, who was standing near Helen, asked. "I'd sort of like to tag along if I can arrange my business."

"Some quiet place where Ruth can't find any work," Helen put in. "Where do you want to go, Ruth?"

Ruth did not hear the last, for her attention had been attracted to a man who was walking rapidly toward the group.

"Here comes our director, Mr. Grimes. I must see him for a minute."

She started forward, leaving the others to discuss vacation plans. At one time, Ruth had worked under Mr. Grimes, and although she disliked his disagreeable manner and pessimism, she admired his ability. He was not a regular member of her company, but was helping Ruth with her prize picture.

Ruth discussed plans for the next day's work with Mr. Grimes, and together they pored over the script which she had with her.

"We'll shoot the rest of the big storm scene to-morrow," Ruth explained. "The part where the rascal attempts to run away with the child —the storm overtakes him—the church steeple falls, burying him in the wreckage."

"Suits me," Mr. Grimes agreed. "How many extras will you need for the mob scene?"

Ruth did not reply. She was looking beyond the director to the bench where she had left her three friends. They were acting strangely. Tom and Helen especially seemed excited. Then Ruth saw the messenger boy who evidently had approached while her back had been turned.

She left Mr. Grimes abruptly and hurried toward her friends.

"What is it?" she cried. "Is it bad news?"

A yellow envelope dropped from Tom's hand to the ground. His face was white and drawn.

"It's from home," he explained huskily. "My father is very sick. They want Helen and me to come home at once."

CHAPTER II

HOMEWARD BOUND

For a moment after the startling announcement, Ruth Fielding could not find words to express her sympathy. It seemed impossible to believe that anything could have happened to the kind old gentleman who lived at Cameron Hall near Ruth's old home, the Red Mill.

Mr. Cameron was a widower, retired from active business, and Tom and Helen were devoted to him. Ruth often had visited Cameron Hall and in many ways he had seemed almost as a father to her.

"Sick?" she brought out at last. "What on earth——"

"We don't know what the matter is," Helen explained quickly. "The telegram doesn't say. It just says come at once."

"It may be too late before we get there," Tom said, in very low tones.

"Oh, no, Tommy boy!" Ruth pressed his hand comfortingly. "Don't take it that way.

Everything will come out all right, I'm sure."

Ruth spoke with an optimism she did not entirely feel, for she knew that Mr. Cameron was far from strong.

"We'll go East at once," Tom announced, but he spoke as though in a half-daze. He seemed unable to think clearly.

"I'll go with you," Chess declared. "Let's get a time-table right away and see how soon we can get out of here."

Tom gripped his friend's hand gratefully. All eyes were now turned upon Ruth. What would she do? There was a brief period of silence, and then Tom answered the question for her.

"Of course Ruth can't come. Your work must come first. After all, I suppose there won't be anything to do when we get home—except wait."

"Oh, Tommy, if only I could go along!"

"I wish you could, Ruth," and Tom managed to smile. "But you have too much at stake. You're under contract to finish this picture by a definite date."

"Yes, I know you're right, Tom. But I'll wind up my work in a week or two at the latest, if I have to dig night and day! Then I'll take the first train home. Perhaps, after all, things will be much better than you expect."

"I hope so," Tom replied, but the worried look did not leave his face.

"Let's take a taxi," Chess suggested. "I'll stop at the station and make reservations."

The four friends were soon seated in an automobile, speeding toward the central part of the city. Very few words were spoken during the ride, for each person was absorbed in his own thoughts.

Ruth cast a shy glance at Tom. How she wished that she could throw up her work and go with her friends back to the Red Mill. This was the time, if ever, that Tom really needed her. She wondered if he felt that she was deserting him.

"Tom is so discouraged," she thought, "and I'm afraid he's almost made up his mind that my work will always come first—that I'll never marry him."

Ruth found it difficult to keep back the tears as she thought of her early friendship with Tom Cameron and his twin sister, Helen. She had met them soon after she came as an orphan to make her home with her great-uncle, Jabez Potter, and his faithful housekeeper, Aunt Alvirah Boggs, at the Red Mill, located near Cheslow, in one of the New England states.

Ruth and Helen had enjoyed boarding school and college together. Even before Ruth played her part in the World War, she had accepted Tom's ring, and Helen, who boasted that she

liked to follow her chum's lead, had accepted a similar engagement token from Chessleigh Copley.

But Ruth's heart had always been fixed on a writing career. Even in college she won some fame as a scenario writer. Later, Mr. Hammond, president of the Alectrion Film Corporation, had aided her in the organization of the Fielding Film Company. With Tom as the treasurer, Ruth's company had prospered and had established offices in New York as well as Hollywood, California.

Ruth's adventures brought her into contact with unprincipled persons and carried her to strange lands, but always the girl held her own. From the time the reader first met her in the initial volume of this series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," she had proved herself an unusually bright and clear-headed girl. Although Ruth had won fame, she never forgot her early friends.

Her latest success, recounted in "Ruth Fielding and Her Great Scenario," gained international honors for her. But fame had brought added responsibilities, and now Ruth asked herself if she could really call her time her own.

"I don't care!" she told herself firmly. "As soon as this picture is over with, I'm going to give

Tom more of my time. I owe it to him and to myself."

Tom and Chess, who were frequently called from the city on business, had taken rooms at a hotel. During Ruth's siege on the great picture, she and Helen had taken an apartment a short distance from the studio and not far from the hotel. Ruth found that she could work more effectively where it was quiet, and by avoiding the hotel she escaped the attention which her fame had brought.

"We'll drop you girls at your apartment," Chess offered. "Tom and I can attend to the reservations. We'll telephone as soon as we find out about trains."

Once inside the apartment, Ruth flew about like mad helping Helen pack her traveling bags. Ruth assumed the entire responsibility, for Helen seemed almost helpless. The dependency of her chum, the need for action, kept Ruth busy and prevented her from thinking of the unpleasant situation. The telephone rang and Ruth hurried to answer it.

"It's Chess," she informed Helen an instant later. "They've booked reservations on the Limited that leaves in less than an hour. If you don't take that, you can't get another through train until to-morrow."

"I'll never make it," Helen half-sobbed.

"Yes, you will, honey." Instantly Ruth had her arms about her chum. "I'll get everything packed for you."

"But my trunk!"

"Never mind your trunk. I'll send it on later."

"Oh, Ruth, how can we ever repay you——"

"Nonsense." Ruth spoke almost brusquely to hide her own emotion. She was throwing odds and ends into the traveling bag at break-neck speed.

"You've locked that bag, and my stocking is hanging out," Helen pointed out hysterically. She sank down into a chair and dropped her head on her arms.

"Now, Helen, cheer up! It can't be as bad as you think." Ruth ran to the window. "Tom and Chess are outside with a cab now. They must have packed like lightning. Come on!"

Ruth fairly pushed Helen out of the door. They were met by Tom and Chess, who relieved them of the two bags.

"We have ten minutes to catch the Limited," Chess said, glancing at his watch.

"To the Union Station, and step on it," Tom directed the cab driver.

Chess had already purchased the tickets and had reserved their berths in the Pullman. At the station, they quickly paid the driver and hur-

ried to the gate. Helen and Chess said good-by to Ruth and passed through the gate to track Number 3 where their train was already waiting. Ruth, who had no ticket, could not pass the gateman, and Tom paused an instant before he followed Chess and his sister.

"We'll send a telegram as soon as we reach home," he promised. "You'll probably leave Hollywood before it could reach you, so perhaps you'd better call for it at the Chicago station."

"I will, Tommy," Ruth managed.

There was so much that she wanted to tell him, but somehow the words failed to come.

"Ruth"—Tom had taken her hand—there was an expression in his eyes that she had never seen before and one that she could not entirely understand—"I wanted to tell you before I left——"

"Say, young man, if that's your train on track three, she's pulling out now!"

Tom and Ruth wheeled, and saw that, as the gateman had warned, the Limited was slowly leaving the station. Chess and Helen, on the observation platform, were waving their arms frantically.

"Quick, Tom! You can make it if you run!" Ruth gave Tom a tiny push toward the gate.

Instantly alert, Tom rushed through the gate and down the platform. He was not encumbered

by baggage, for Chess had relieved him of it at the station.

Tom's college track practice now served him well. The train was moving slowly, and before it gained headway, the young man caught up with the rear car. Helen and Chess helped him scramble aboard. From the platform, he waved to Ruth, who was anxiously watching through the iron fence.

"I wonder what it was Tom started to tell me," she thought as she walked slowly from the station to the taxicab.

An overpowering loneliness came over her. Tom's face haunted her. It had been so white and haggard. Now that she recalled the fact, he had appeared worried about something even before the telegram arrived. Tom seldom discussed money matters with Ruth, and as treasurer of her film company she trusted him to finance her pictures. Could it be that money matters were bothering him?

"If he were in difficulties, it would be just like him never to let me know," she told herself. "Tom always tries to take the worry on his own shoulders."

CHAPTER III

WINDING UP BUSINESS

RUTH FIELDING did not sleep well that night. She arose early the next morning ready to plunge into work, but her mind was still on the telegram that had called her friends East. The apartment seemed deserted without Helen.

Ruth soon disposed of her morning mail. As usual there was a stack of letters from "fans" and a number of attractive business propositions. Two letters with familiar postmarks attracted her attention. Even before she ripped open the first, she recognized the scrawling hand of a former college friend, Ann Hicks of Silver Ranch. The letter was a mere note, for as the Western girl apologized, "writing was harder for her than riding wild broncos."

In her letter, Ann congratulated Ruth upon winning the scenario contest and invited her to bring her friends and spend a few months at Silver Ranch.

The second letter was from another college

friend, Nettie Parsons of Louisiana. Nettie also extended a cordial invitation to Ruth to visit her.

Her mail out of the way, Ruth turned her attention to more serious problems. That day and the ones which followed were all too short. Ruth's company understood that she was working under a strain, and to a man they helped her.

Working hours were forgotten. Ruth and her company slaved from early morning until late at night. Ruth scarcely took the time to eat, but often sent out for a sandwich and nibbled it as she pored over the script.

"We'll finish to-morrow easily," Ruth told Mr. Grimes at the end of the week. "I want to shoot that last scene early to-morrow morning and then get away."

Ruth was on hand bright and early the next morning. She was more cheerful than she had been all week, for the knowledge that she would soon be speeding eastward to her friends gave her new energy. Tom had not wired to inform her of his father's condition, but she really did not expect a telegram before she reached Chicago.

Ruth had sent Helen's trunk, and her own was packed. She had reserved a berth on the midnight train, and expected to be well started on her journey by the following morning. She was thinking of these things when Mr. Grimes spoke to her.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Fielding, but we're in a mess! The extra that was to double for the hero and make the parachute drop from Markham's plane isn't here. He sent word that he was sick."

"Sick?" Ruth frowned. "Isn't there some one who will make the jump? An extra?"

Mr. Grimes shook his head.

"I've tried to find some one. Not many actors have had experience, and this stunt has an element of danger."

"You're quite right. Even if the picture is delayed, we can't just take any one that is willing to try it."

Ruth was disappointed. Several hours' delay not only meant that she must pay her actors while they stood idle, but probably it also meant that it would be impossible for her to get away on the midnight train for Cheslow.

"Miss Fielding, won't you allow me to try the stunt for you?"

Ruth glanced up quickly and saw Fred Orman standing in front of her. She smiled warmly, for she had always felt friendly toward the young actor. She had known him when he was down-and-out and friendless. He had aided her in recovering her prize scenario, and Ruth had assisted him in securing a position with a film company. Later, Orman had changed over to Ruth's

company, and had been given a small part in the big picture.

"I could double for the hero easily," he urged. "We have about the same build and my face won't show."

"That isn't what troubles me," Ruth said thoughtfully, for she realized that Orman had offered his services in gratitude for her favors of the past. "I don't like to have you take the risk."

"There isn't much risk with Markham handling the plane, Miss Fielding. Anyway, I made a similar jump when I was working for the Newell company."

Ruth hesitated a moment longer, then gave in.

"All right," she said gratefully. "Orman, you've saved the day for me!"

Preparations for the filming of the scene went forward hurriedly. With Jack Markham handling the stick, Orman had no fear, and he waved his hand gayly to Ruth as the plane took off.

"You can't tell a man's courage by his size," Ruth reflected with admiration. "I'll never forget how Fred Orman tackled that scoundrel, Dean Hollister, who was twice his weight!"

While Ruth watched anxiously from the ground, the airplane slowly circled the field. Then, as the cameramen did their work, Orman sprang from the airplane. Ruth held her breath

until she saw the parachute open a short distance above the earth.

"You've certainly proved your worth in this picture," she congratulated him warmly, after the scene had been completed. "I'll see to it that you have a better part in my next picture."

"I wish you had another job for me, Miss Fielding."

Jack Markham, who was standing near Ruth, made the statement. While he was a skillful and daring aviator, he did not photograph well, and could not be used in a close-up. For that reason, it was impossible to give him important parts.

"I wish I had something for you," Ruth said regretfully; "but I don't plan to make another picture until after I've had a long rest."

"Well, perhaps you can use me later on."

"Perhaps," Ruth agreed.

As she regretfully said good-by to the members of her company, little did she dream of the unfortunate events which were soon to recall Jack Markham forcibly to her mind.

CHAPTER IV

A SURPRISE

"FOUR more hours and I'll be speeding on my way," thought Ruth, almost happily.

She had rushed home from the studio after saying good-by to her film friends and had checked her bags at the railway station. She had cleared up every detail of business. Now there was nothing to do save wait impatiently for train time.

The telephone jangled. Ruth frowned slightly as she hastened to answer it.

"Oh, dear, I hope nothing delays me now! And if I have to decide another business question, I'll go crazy!" Ruth reached for the receiver.

She was relieved when she recognized the pleasant voice of Mr. Hammond, president of the Alectrion Film Corporation.

"Hello, Miss Fielding? I have no intention of allowing you to slip away without saying

good-by—that is, unless you're too tired or busy."

Ruth quickly assured her old friend that she was neither.

"Then how about a little farewell party?" came the voice over the wire. "Just a few of your old friends and some girls that went to your college. We'll see you to your train after the party."

"Fine!" Ruth responded, trying to make her voice sound enthusiastic. "It's nice of you——"

"Not at all. My car will stop for you. It's just a little party, but we'll make it a gay send-off for the most popular director in Hollywood."

Before the girl could protest at the compliment, the receiver clicked at the other end of the wire. She turned and walked away from the telephone.

Ruth was in no party mood, but not for worlds would she say anything that would cause Mr. Hammond and her friends to suspect the true state of her feelings. They had planned the gathering as a surprise for her, and it would be selfish of her not to participate.

She was waiting when Mr. Hammond and his party of merrymakers stopped at the apartment to whisk her away by motor to the fashionable hotel where the affair was to be held. Mr. Hammond's "little" parties usually turned out to be

very elaborate gatherings, Ruth had discovered from past experience.

Mr. Hammond had engaged an orchestra, and the large hotel ballroom had been turned over to him. As Ruth stepped inside the room, she observed that at least fifty of her friends and acquaintances had arrived ahead of her.

"Oh, Mr. Hammond," she protested, "all this, for me?"

"It's little enough to offer a great scenario writer," he smiled gallantly. Then added more seriously: "By the way, you aren't writing another soon, are you?"

Ruth hesitated, then admitted the truth.

"I'm afraid I can't leave writing alone, Mr. Hammond. I have an idea or two in my head now, and I thought perhaps I could get started on a new script in a few days."

Mr. Hammond threw up his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"I give you up, Miss Fielding! You'll work yourself into your grave—and enjoy doing it!"

Ruth's old friends crowded about her. Marcus Brun, Mr. Hammond's technical director, was one of the first to speak to her, and close at his heels was Bert Traymore, cameraman, and a host of other film folk who had worked with Ruth in Alaska.

Fred Orman was among the guests, but he did

not push forward as did the others to speak to Ruth. He remained at a distance and waited for her to recognize him.

"That man!" Ruth thought with amusement. "He's so sensitive. Just because he was down-and-out once doesn't mean that he hasn't always been a gentleman. I'm glad Mr. Hammond invited him."

She stepped forward and with a warm smile, told him good-by for the second time that day. Mr. Hammond introduced her to three California girls who had attended Ardmore college.

"We've been dying to meet you," one of them informed her. "We were watching you film a picture about a week ago."

Ruth found it impossible to keep her mind upon the party. She appreciated the kindness of her friends in planning the gathering, but she did not feel like talking or dancing. She wanted to sit down in a quiet corner and think.

Tom had mailed a postcard at Chicago, but that was the only word she had received since the party had started for the East. She had no idea of Mr. Cameron's present condition.

"Miss Fielding, you look tired." Mr. Hammond interrupted the conversation which was gurgling and boiling about Ruth. "I'm afraid we've talked you to death. We'll take you to your train now and see you safely aboard."

The entire party piled into automobiles, attracting considerable attention from passers-by on the street. At the station Ruth was showered with enough candy, magazines, and flowers to last through ten trips. She cordially thanked her friends and passed through the gate to her train.

" 'Pears to me, you is powe'ful popula', Miss," the chocolate-colored porter who assisted her to find her berth observed with a grin. "Heah you are—number eight."

Ruth had selected a section in preference to a drawing room. She enjoyed studying faces, and during the long ride across the continent she planned to gain material for her new scenario.

That night she tossed restlessly in her berth. She was conscious of every stop the train made and the very click of the rails annoyed her. Why did she keep thinking of Tom? She seemed to have an unexplainable feeling that something dreadful was about to happen.

"Silly!" Ruth told herself sternly. "Too much work—getting nervous, I guess."

At last she dropped off to sleep. She awoke early, however, and went to breakfast in the dining car ahead of the rush. As she slowly ate her grapefruit, she watched the scenery "flash by the windows."

Returning to her car, she found her section

made up. Ruth unlocked her traveling bag and took out notebook and pencil.

"Now for a few notes on my new scenario," she decided.

But she did not write in her notebook. Instead, she leaned back against the cushions and looked out of the window. The mountains were beautiful, she thought, and she loved the tall pines.

"If it hadn't been for the telegram, Tom and Chess and Helen would be here with me," she told herself, for perhaps the fiftieth time that morning. "From now on, I'm going to devote more of my time to Tom. I've neglected him shamefully."

All that day and the next she thought about it. What had come over her? Never before had she felt this way. Always, moving pictures had come first with her. She loved Tom, of course; but her work had been an equally vital interest in her life.

Now, it seemed to Ruth that the moving picture business somehow failed to satisfy her. She felt almost resentful that her work had made it impossible for her to accompany her friends at the time they most needed her.

Ruth had selected the most direct route east. Another time she would enjoy brief stops at Salt

Lake City, Denver and other points along her road, but not this time.

"Brush you off, Miss? We're comin' into Chicago."

The service performed, Ruth tipped her porter and waited impatiently for the train to stop. Here she would change cars for the next long jump, and here it was that she had arranged with Tom to receive a telegram.

Followed by the station porter who carried her bags, Ruth hurried along the platform, through the gate, and to the telegraph office.

"Have you a message for Miss Fielding?" she demanded.

"Miss Fielding?" The clerk ran through a list of envelopes with provoking slowness. "Yes, here it is."

Ruth took the envelope and nervously ripped it open. Surely, it would be good news. Her eyes scanned the contents and unconsciously her hand went out and gripped the edge of the counter for support.

"Tom and Helen."

"Father sinking fast," the message said. "Doctor holds out little hope. We need you dreadfully.

"Tom and Helen."

CHAPTER V

DISHEARTENING NEWS

"Cheslow, Miss. I'll take your bags."

Ruth followed the Pullman porter down the aisle and with a sigh of relief stepped from the train to the station platform. The ride from Chicago had been long and tiresome, and the telegram from Tom and Helen had added greatly to her anxiety.

She glanced around for a familiar face, but saw no one she knew save the station master and old Doctor Davison in his runabout.

Dr. Davison was evidently expecting some one, for as Ruth stepped from the car he looked at her closely. Then as he recognized her he got out of the runabout and hurried forward.

"Ruth Fielding! I declare, you get prettier every time I see you! Want a lift? I'm going right past the Red Mill. I was expecting a nurse on this train, and I was going to take her with me out to Cameron Hall. I guess she didn't come."

"For Mr. Cameron?" Ruth asked quickly. "How is he?"

Dr. Davison became sober.

"I haven't seen him this morning. Was just starting on my round of visits now. Mr. Cameron has pneumonia, and the crisis probably won't come for a day or two. Then he may take a turn for better—or worse."

"You mean he's in danger of——"

"Mr. Cameron isn't strong, Ruth, and he seems worried about some investments. Helen and their old nurse are looking after him, but they're nearly worn out from night and day work. We sent to the city for a trained nurse, but she hasn't arrived."

"Can't I help?" Ruth suggested hopefully. "I learned a few things during my experience at the war front."

"I'm sure we can use you. Especially if the nurse doesn't come on the afternoon train."

The doctor started his car, and in silence they drove through the town of Cheslow. Ruth glanced around with interest. There was a new feed store, but otherwise everything seemed about as she had left it. Her attention was attracted to a side street.

"Look at the crowd," she observed wonderingly. "What could happen in Cheslow to get so many people excited?"

Dr. Davison turned to see where Ruth pointed, but already they had gone by the side street, and the crowd was hidden from view.

"Oh, some one ran over a dog, I suppose," he said lightly. "Nothing exciting ever happens here."

Ruth was convinced that the alarm was caused by something other than a dog, but she said no more, and soon entirely forgot the matter. Presently, she caught a glimpse of the Red Mill, and immediately her heart was filled with longing.

"I guess you'd better drop me at the Red Mill," she told the doctor. "I can't go past without greeting Aunt Alvirah and Uncle Jabez. I'll get my own car out and run up to Cameron Hall in a few minutes."

Ruth fairly ran up the path to the Red Mill, in spite of the weight of her baggage. Home again! The Lumano valley was always beautiful, but never had it seemed more attractive to Ruth.

The Red Mill looked a little shabby, a trifle in need of paint, but otherwise it was just the same.

"Uncle Jabez isn't much for improvements," Ruth thought. "Anyway, I'm glad of it. I shouldn't want the old Red Mill changed."

Straight to the farmhouse kitchen Ruth went,

for there she expected to find Aunt Alvirah. She opened the screen door without knocking.

"Aunt Alvirah!"

The tiny hoop-backed woman at the sink turned quickly as her name was spoken, and the dish in her hand clattered as she set it down.

"It's my pretty, come home," she mumbled, hobbling across the kitchen. "Oh, my back! And, oh, my bones!"

Ruth gave her an affectionate hug and then held her at arm's length for a better look.

"It's good to see you again," she declared. "But I'm sorry your back still troubles you."

"Seems like I ain't as spry as I used to be," Aunt Alvirah sighed, and then as though to disprove her own words, hobbled across the room after a chair for Ruth.

"I'm afraid I can't sit down now, Aunt Alvirah."

"Can't sit down?" the old lady cried out almost childishly, and her face showed her bitter disappointment.

"Oh, I'm not leaving town," Ruth hastened to tell her. "I must run up to Cameron Hall and see how Mr. Cameron is. Then I'll come right back. Is my car in the barn?"

"Jest where you left it, my pretty. Ain't been touched."

"But I told Uncle Jabez to use it while I was gone—to take you riding."

"It ain't never been out of the barn. Your uncle says it costs too much fer tires and gasoline, and that bumpin' over the rough roads is bad fer my back."

"Well, never mind, Aunt Alvirah. Uncle Jabez has plenty of money, and if I'm here long enough, we'll work on that saving streak of his. I'll take you riding myself."

Ruth loved her miserly uncle, and in his way he returned the affection. She was no longer afraid of him, and although he had taken her into his home "out of charity," she had won his grudging respect by her success in business. She had even turned his own money to profit for him, convincing him beyond a shadow of a doubt that "Niece Ruth was all right."

Although he had a substantial bank account, Uncle Jabez maintained a rigid eye over the household expenditures, much to the disgust of Ruth.

"By the way, where is Uncle Jabez?" Ruth asked.

"He went to town this morning to take back some shingles that he didn't need fer the barn. He ought to be back pretty soon." Aunt Alvirah got up from the low rocker and hobbled

across the room to the window. "Oh, my back! Oh, my bones!"

Ruth followed her to the window. She, too, looked out toward the barnyard to catch a glimpse of her uncle.

"There he is, Aunt Alvirah!" she cried. "He must have walked all the way out from town in this hot sun. Why, Aunt Alvirah, he acts as though something is wrong!"

"He ain't actin' natural," the old lady admitted, pressing her face closer to the window. "He looks upset about somethin'. Maybe the man wouldn't take back the shingles."

Before Ruth could reach the kitchen door, it was flung open, and Jabez Potter stood in front of them. He did not appear to take in the significance of Ruth's presence, although his eyes roved first from her face to the wrinkled one of Aunt Alvirah. His eyes were wild and hard, and he was out of breath from too fast walking.

"What's happened?" Ruth cried quickly.

The answer, unexpected and dramatic, struck her with full force.

"The Farmers Savings Bank of Cheslow is busted! I've lost my money! And, Ruth, you've lost yours, too!"

CHAPTER VI

MORE TROUBLE

After Jabez Potter had burst into the kitchen of the Red Mill with the startling announcement that the bank of Cheslow had failed, there was a moment of silence as the full significance of the news dawned upon Ruth Fielding and Aunt Alvirah. Then, the latter, overcome by grief, gave a low moan and began pacing up and down the kitchen.

"My money's gone! My money's gone! Oh, my back! And, oh, my bones!"

"Your money?"

Ruth had been thinking of her own troubles, of her account at the Cheslow Farmers Savings Bank. Now she rushed over to the little woman and put her arms about her comfortingly.

"How much did you have in the bank, Aunt Alvirah?"

"Most three hundred dollars. I been savin' it fer years out of the egg money, so's I wouldn't be such a burden on your uncle."

"Don't cry, Aunt Alvirah. Perhaps there's some mistake."

"There ain't no mistake," Jabez broke in harshly. "I tell you, the money's gone! I'm busted!"

He dropped his head on his hands. The realization that the money he had hoarded for a lifetime had suddenly been swept away, overcame him. He lifted his head and turned accusing eyes upon Ruth.

"If you hadn't advised me to put my money in the bank, I'd 'a' kept most of it here at the Red Mill," he snapped.

"And had it stolen for certain," Ruth returned dryly. "Anyway, I didn't tell you to put all your money in one bank. The first rule of a good investor, is not to put all his eggs in the same basket."

"How much did you have in?" Jabez demanded gruffly. He knew that he had unjustly blamed Ruth.

"Nearly forty thousand dollars. It was most of the prize money from the scenario contest, and I intended to use it for my next picture. Now there can't be any 'next picture.' "

Jabez whistled.

"Say, them fellers must 'a' got away with a pile."

"What fellows?" Ruth demanded. "I thought you said the bank broke."

"Well, it did. The bank examiners closed 'er down this morning when I was in town. But it was on account of a robbery."

"How much did they get? The robbers, I mean?"

"Well, they got enough. With the robbery on top of some bad farm loans they'd made, the examiner closed 'er down. We can't get our money! I'm busted!"

Ruth grew impatient.

"Go on with the story, for pity's sake. Did the robbers get away? Who were they?"

"You can't prove it by me. Bill Jones was goin' through town late last night, and he says he seen some suspicious lookin' fellows near the bank. One had on a red sweater and a plaid cap, and they think maybe he done it."

"Is the sheriff after them?"

"Not yet. He's at the bank now, lookin' fer clews."

"And by the time he's discovered his clews, the men will be a hundred miles away! Why don't they telephone to neighboring towns and tell them to be on the watch for the robbers?"

"That's an idear, Niece Ruth. I reckon they ain't thought of it."

"That isn't an idea. It's just plain common

sense," Ruth returned. "I tell you, Uncle Jabez, if I can help it, those men won't get away with my money—or yours—or Aunt Alvirah's!"

"Unless you git your forty thousand back, you can't go on with your pictures, can you?" Jabez questioned, thinking for the first time of Ruth's loss rather than his own.

"It may mean I'll have to close down the studio for a time," Ruth agreed. "The remainder of my money is pretty well tied up. You see, I was depending on this forty thousand to meet my immediate expenses."

"You'll git my egg money back fer me, won't you, Ruthie?"

Aunt Alvirah, firm in the faith that "her pretty" could accomplish miracles, turned pleading eyes upon the girl. Ruth avoided the glance and looked out of the window. She felt Aunt Alvirah's loss more deeply than her own. And there was so little that she could do!

"I'll get the money back if I can," she said quietly. "But I can't interfere with the officers."

"Then you'll never git it back," Jabez announced pessimistically. "Old Si Perkins, the sheriff, never caught nothin' in all his life 'cept a cold!"

Ruth smiled faintly, but the worried frown immediately reappeared.

"Mr. Cameron must 'a' been hit pretty hard," Jabez observed presently.

"Did he have money in the Farmers Bank, too?"

"I reckon he lost a heap! He owned some of the stock, they say. And they say he ain't well, neither."

"Mr. Cameron is in a critical condition," Ruth informed her uncle. "He mustn't learn of this, or the news might make him worse."

"It's enough to kill a well man," Jabez groaned. "I'm busted!"

"Don't think about it," Ruth advised a bit impatiently. "It doesn't help matters to groan about it. I'd like to see Helen and Tom before they hear about the bank. I wonder if my car will run!"

"I pumped the air in your tires last week when I heard that Tom had come home. I knowed you'd be comin' along. I guess there's enough gas in the tank to take you to Cameron Hall an' back."

"I may stay at Cameron Hall to-night," Ruth called over her shoulder as she left the kitchen. "But if I do, I'll come back and let you know."

She hurried to the barn where her roadster was kept. Jabez Potter had refused to purchase a car of his own, and had not seen fit to build a garage. Ruth very likely would never have pur-

chased her own car had it not been for the repeated urging of Tom and Helen, who pointed out that she was now "somebody," and rapid transportation was a means of conserving her time.

Ruth unbolted the barn doors. Save for a thick coat of dust, the roadster was as she had left it a few months before. She climbed in and soon had the motor humming. She backed skillfully out of the barn, turned the car, and went bumping down the lane to the main road.

Once on the smooth highway, Ruth speeded the car.

"I wonder if Tom and Helen have heard the news of the robbery?" she asked herself for the second time. "This will only add to their troubles. Poor Mr. Cameron! I must warn Helen not to let him know."

At another time Ruth would have enjoyed the ride over the winding country road. It was thrilling to feel the heavy car respond to her slightest touch on the wheel. Now, as she drew near Cameron Hall, she noted that the spacious grounds were as well kept as ever. Helen had told her that Mr. Cameron had recently become interested in landscape gardening, and she saw evidence of this.

The big iron gate was wide open, as though to welcome her, and Ruth drove through and

down the cement driveway. Bright flowers lined the walk, and a tiny crystal pool added to the attractiveness of the grounds.

"I'll stop the car before I get to the house," Ruth decided. "The noise of the engine might disturb Mr. Cameron."

Accordingly, she got out of the car and started to walk toward the house. She paused an instant as she saw a familiar figure on the veranda.

It was Helen, and she was motioning to a man who stood a short distance from the porch.

"Wonder what Helen wants of their hired man?" Ruth asked herself. "She seems excited about something. Perhaps Mr. Cameron is worse."

Alarmed, Ruth hurried forward. Helen caught sight of her before she reached the porch. She started to call out to Ruth, then glanced toward the house and checked herself.

"Oh, Ruth, I'm so glad you've come!" she half sobbed as her chum reached her. "What's this I hear about the failure of the bank? Where do you suppose Tom is? Have you seen him?"

"Tom?" Ruth gasped. "Isn't he here?"

CHAPTER VII

TOM'S DISAPPEARANCE

"Oh, Ruth, I'm so worried! I don't know what on earth to do! Tom's gone—disappeared!"

Helen nervously fingered the strings of her apron and cast an anxious and hopeful glance about the Cameron grounds, as though she expected her twin brother to make a sudden appearance.

"He *must* be here somewhere!" Ruth declared, her heart sinking. "How long has he been gone?"

Surely nothing had happened to Tom, she told herself. He was so dependable, so self-reliant. Yet obviously something had gone wrong, and Ruth was more alarmed than she cared to admit.

"He was here all last evening, Ruth. That's the funny thing about it."

"When did you see him last?"

"Just before I went to bed. Tom and I both stayed up with father until about ten o'clock.

Della, our old nurse, suggested that we go to bed early, as we'd been up all the night before and were tired enough to drop. Father seemed to be resting fairly well."

"I'm glad of that," Ruth put in.

"Tom didn't want to leave father, but Della insisted. We both went upstairs. Tom said good-night to me and went into his room."

"And that was the last you saw of him?"

"The very last, Ruth. I got up this morning, and when Tom didn't come down for breakfast, I called him. He didn't answer. I decided to let him sleep an hour or so, because I knew how tired he was. Father had a comfortable night with Della sitting up with him, and there seemed no need of waking Tom."

"Of course not, dear."

"Then after an hour I went upstairs and knocked on his door. He didn't answer, so I went in. Tom had disappeared! Right into thin air! Ruth, I tell you it's uncanny!"

"There must be an explanation," Ruth reasoned. "Has his bed been slept in?"

"No, that's the mysterious part. The sheets haven't been touched."

"Have you searched the grounds?"

"Not yet, Ruth. I didn't know he was gone until about an hour ago. I've gone over every inch of the house though, and can't find a trace

of him. I was just asking the hired man if he had seen him anywhere."

Ruth felt heart-sick. Of course, it was likely that Tom would return to Cameron Hall in due time, yet it was unlike Tom not to be more considerate of Helen, and the girl had a feeling that the disappearance of her fiancé boded trouble.

Tom's failure to appear, on top of the bank robbery, was unfortunate, to say the least.

"Everything seems to pile down on us at once," Helen said. "First father gets sick, then Tom disappears, and then the bank robbery."

"Your father doesn't know about the bank, does he?"

"No, our hired man just told me about it, Ruth. Of course, I'll keep the news from father. I'm afraid he couldn't stand the shock. We have so much in the bank—as a stockholder he's liable —it means——"

"It means that those thieves will be caught and everything will come out all right," Ruth put in with as much optimism as she could muster. "Can I see Tom's room, Helen? Perhaps together we can find some clew to the mystery."

The two girls slipped quietly into the big house and Helen led the way up the stairs to Tom's room. She opened the door and Ruth entered.

An examination disclosed little. Tom's wardrobe was in order, and on the surface at least

everything appeared as it had when last used by the young man. Ruth walked over to the window. A narrow ledge ran from the window to the top of the front porch. It would have been possible for a man to walk along the ledge and enter the room, but Ruth discarded this theory almost as soon as she thought of it.

"It's beyond me," she admitted, as the two girls left the room and made their way slowly downstairs. "As you say, he seems to have disappeared into thin air. Just the same, I think I'll have a look around the grounds."

"Do you think they'll find out who took the money at the bank?" Helen asked, switching to the former subject. "Our hired man said they blew open the vault and escaped in a blue roadster."

"A blue roadster!" Ruth looked sharply at Helen, but her chum did not see the expression on her face. "I hadn't heard that, Helen. Of course, a blue roadster isn't so uncommon. I don't believe any one knows much about the details of the robbery. One guess is as good as another."

The girls tiptoed through the hall past Mr. Cameron's bedroom on the first floor.

"Listen!" Helen whispered.

From the sickroom came a half-mumbled, but distressed call:

"Tom, where are you? I want to see Tom."

"What shall we do?" Helen gasped. "We can't tell him!"

"Let me go in, Helen. Perhaps when he sees an old friend it will take his mind from Tom."

Ruth and Helen opened the door and entered softly. Della, the nurse, got up from a chair near the bedside and moved toward them.

"He seems to be more restless," she told the girls. "I think we'd better send for Dr. Davison."

"I'll telephone now," and Helen hurried from the room.

The man on the bed stirred slightly. Ruth saw that he was deathly white and a mere shadow of his former self.

"Who is it?" he managed. "Is it Tom?"

Ruth went over to the bedside and gently took his hand in hers.

"It's Ruth Fielding," she told him quietly. "Tom will be here after a while."

Ruth's voice seemed to reassure the old gentleman, for he settled back against the pillows. He closed his eyelids and Ruth thought that he was about to go to sleep. Then he started slightly and again murmured:

"Tom! I want Tom!"

Ruth tried to soothe him, and presently he grew

less excited. Helen returned to the room and seated herself near the foot of the bed.

"He's asleep," Ruth whispered after a time. "You stay with him until Dr. Davison comes, Helen. I'll go outside and see if I can find any trace of Tom."

"We must do something, Ruth! Where can he be?"

Ruth shook her head. It was the question she had asked herself at least a hundred times in the last half-hour. Tom would not willingly remain away from his father's bedside, of that she was certain. Something dreadful had happened.

Ruth closed the bedroom door quietly behind her and stole outside.

She caught sight of the hired man at that instant, and motioned to him to wait until she caught up with him. It would do no harm to ask a few questions, Ruth decided.

"Have you seen Tom?" she questioned.

"No, Miss, I haven't. Miss Cameron told me he had disappeared."

"You haven't noticed any strange persons about the place?"

"No, Miss. I've been here most of the morning. And there wasn't any one around last night."

"Thank you," Ruth said, and left him.

She hesitated, then cut across the lawn and walked rapidly toward the Cameron garage.

"I'll just go over and see if his car is here," she decided. "It's too bad he's the only young man around Cheslow who owns a blue roadster."

She reached the garage and tried the door. It was unbolted, and she pushed it back with little effort. Ruth stepped inside, stopped short, and stared.

"What can this mean?" she asked herself in fright.

The garage was empty! Tom's blue roadster was gone!

Ruth Fielding leaned weakly against the garage door and tried to think.

"It can't be!" she whispered. "Tom can't be gone!"

No longer could the girl quiet her fears by trying to make herself believe that the young treasurer of the Fielding Film Company was somewhere about the Cameron premises. His blue roadster had disappeared from the garage, but what had happened to it she did not know.

She started to leave the garage, took a few steps forward, then on second thought, retraced her steps.

"I'll just have a look around," she decided.

Ruth began a systematic search. Almost immediately her eye fastened upon something, and

with a low cry of surprise she reached down and picked it up from the cement floor. It might be Tom's clothing, she thought, as she held up the garments to the light. Ruth stared almost stupidly.

In her hand she held a red sweater and a plaid cap!

"I can't believe it!" she gasped. "I won't believe it!" she added resolutely. "I know Tom too well for that."

Yet there was no denying that she had found the garments in the garage, and Uncle Jabez Potter had told her that one of the bank robbers had been seen wearing a red sweater and a plaid cap. The evidence was disturbing.

"Tom was worried about something even before he learned that his father was sick," Ruth reasoned. "But if he had been in financial difficulties, I'm sure he would have told me. Anyway, if Tom Cameron had really had a part in the robbery, he wouldn't be so stupid as to leave his cap and sweater out in plain sight where a person couldn't help but see them!"

Satisfied in her own mind, Ruth glanced about. The hired man had vanished and there was no one in sight. Quickly, the girl went to an old clothes closet in the garage and stuffed the sweater and cap into it, down under a pile of soiled overalls.

"It's possible that Bill Jones saw Tom at Cheslow in his roadster and mistook him for the robber," Ruth went on to herself, as she walked slowly back toward the house. "It doesn't take much to start a rumor."

Ruth could not escape the questions of her chum, for Helen had seen her coming up the path to the house and met her in the hallway.

"You didn't find any trace of him, Ruth?"

"His roadster is gone."

"Oh!"

"Brace up, Helen. That in itself may not mean anything serious."

"But what are we going to do, Ruth? Father keeps calling for him all the time. Dr. Davison was just here again. He says father isn't in any immediate danger, but that Tom should be here to quiet him. The extra nurse didn't come, either—I don't know what could have happened to her."

"You can count on me to help, Helen. Can't I stay up with your father to-night?"

"Bless your heart, Ruthie. Don't know what I'd do without you. Just the same, I know you're tired after your long ride across the continent."

"Nonsense!"

"No, Ruth, I'll sit up with him to-night. But I'll be grateful if you'll stay here to-morrow

night. The doctor rather expects the crisis by that time and—well, I'd like to have you with me then."

"Of course, honey. Now don't worry about Tom. I have a notion that maybe he went downtown in the roadster and stuck around to hear about the bank robbery. I'll drive down in my car and see what I can learn."

Ruth drove her roadster slowly along the road to Cheslow. She did not believe that she would find Tom there. Now that she had left Helen, there was no longer any need to keep up the pretense of cheer. Ruth was heart-sick.

She parked her car near the Farmers Savings Bank and got out. A crowd of excited persons was still congregated on the steps of the building. A sign on the door stated that the bank was closed.

As Ruth walked toward the bank, a side door opened and Si Perkins, the sheriff, accompanied by two deputies, came outside talking earnestly together. The sheriff caught sight of Ruth and called out to her.

"Hello there, Miss Fielding. Hear you lost more than any one else in the bank."

"Have you learned anything more about the robbery?" Ruth asked, without confirming the statement concerning her own loss.

"Well, we're gittin' hot on the trail. We have some new clews."

"What clews?"

"Well, it appears now like it was one feller did it. We've been takin' finger-prints, and I reckon we'll catch him yet."

The sheriff held up a sheet for Ruth's inspection. She glanced at it and smiled.

"Of course I don't know," she said gently, "but it looks to me as though those faint smudges were made from a rubber glove. Certainly they aren't finger-prints."

The sheriff looked at the paper with chagrin. Knowing smiles were exchanged by persons in the crowd.

"I reckon they're finger-prints all right," Si insisted. "Anyway, we got some more clews. We know one of the fellows wore a red sweater. And it was some one that knowed the bank pretty well, because the burglar alarm was cut so it didn't go off."

"How did they get the money?"

"Forced the front door and blew open the vault."

"It's a wonder the noise wasn't heard."

"Well, Miss Fielding, the town ought to have more night watchmen. It's what I've always been sayin'. The men on duty was over to the

railroad station and down by the river when this happened."

"How much was taken from the bank?"

"That I don't know. The bank cashier's in there now with the examiner, trying to figger it out. The deposits were heavy yesterday. I reckon between seventy-five and a hundred thousand was taken."

Ruth tried to hide her irritation. She understood Si Perkins and his methods. Obviously, if she waited for him to locate the guilty persons, she probably would never again see her forty thousand dollars. And Aunt Alvirah was depending upon her for the recovery of "the egg money!" Uncle Jabez Potter would always feel that he had lost his savings because he had followed her advice and had placed his money in the bank.

"I've sent for some city detectives," the sheriff went on, with a touch of pride. "They ought to be here some time to-day."

Ruth resisted a desire to reach out and shake the man. Did he never think for himself?

"In the meantime, where will your thieves be? Miles away, of course. They won't wait around for the city detectives! Why don't you start out in cars and search the country around here? Surely, Mr. Jones knows in what direction the

roadster was traveling when he saw it start away from the bank."

"That's right!" a man in the crowd cried enthusiastically. "Let's go after 'em! It doesn't do any good to stand around and take fingerprints!"

Si Perkins ran his hands through his hair nervously. Then he assumed an air of importance.

"Bill Jones said the roadster was headed east, out toward the Red Mill and Cameron Hall," he stated. "Come on, men, we'll run 'em down before night!"

Ruth turned away. Little chance Si Perkins and his posse would have of running down the gang of criminals in the blue roadster unless they showed more skill and speed than they had previously. Now that she had provoked action, the girl of the Red Mill almost regretted it, for the sheriff had declared that the car was last seen traveling in the direction of Cameron Hall. That was the last place in the world that Ruth wanted the search to begin.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLOOD

RUTH climbed again into her roadster. Before she had started the engine a farmer who lived a short distance from the Red Mill came over to the car and spoke to her.

"Hear they had quite a rain yesterday up north of us," he informed her.

Ruth glanced up quickly.

"I hadn't heard. The river is unusually high at this time of year, too."

"You may get flooded there at the Red Mill. They say it was a regular cloud-burst. Lucky we didn't get it here at Cheslow. It's been a rainy season this year—bad for some of the crops. Seems like we always get it too dry or too wet."

Ruth nodded, and stepped on the electric starter. She took leave of the farmer, and drove rapidly toward the Red Mill. How much had happened in the few hours that she had been home!

One thing after another seemed to worry her.

The information concerning the cloud-burst troubled her a little, for she knew that often a heavy rain above Cheslow flooded the creek near the Red Mill. Such floods seldom did much damage as they lasted only a few hours. But occasionally, when the river was high, as it was at present, the creek and other streams pouring into it caused an overflow that was more serious and lasted longer.

"The river is at the highest point I ever saw it at this time of year," Ruth told herself. "However, I don't believe we're in danger of a flood. It didn't rain here last night, and probably the reports of the rain above us were exaggerated."

It was nearly one o'clock when Ruth drew near the old farmhouse. She reached the driveway and shifted gears to make the grade leading to the barn. She stopped the motor and slowly made her way to the house.

Although the hour was late, Aunt Alvirah, who sat huddled by the stove, had not started dinner. As Ruth entered the kitchen she lifted herself laboriously from her rocker. For once she seemed too crushed to offer her habitual complaint: "Oh, my back! And, oh, my bones!"

"I'll git dinner right on," she said apologetically, hobbling over to the cupboard.

Ruth went to her and gently forced her back into the chair.

"You sit down and rest, Aunt Alvirah. I'll get dinner to-day."

"You don't need to git no dinner for me," Jabez Potter grumbled from his chair at the window. "I don't want none. I ain't hungry and I can't eat nothin'."

"You'll feel better if you have something to eat, Uncle Jabez."

"I'll never feel better until I git my money back," the miller snapped.

The three of them sat down to an unusually quiet meal. Uncle Jabez scarcely ate a bite of food; he had indeed lost his appetite. Before Ruth and Aunt Alvirah had finished, he abruptly pushed back his chair and left the table.

As for Ruth, she made only a pretense of eating. She thought of Tom, and the food choked her.

The afternoon dragged slowly on. Ruth washed and dried the dishes, and for want of another task, put her tiny bedroom in order.

"I guess I'll drive down to Cheslow again," she told Aunt Alvirah. "It's possible the sheriff has found some trace of the bank robbers. Anyway, I want the garage man to overhaul my roadster and see that it is in perfect working order. There's no telling when I may suddenly need it. I'll have the gasoline tank filled to the top and

the oil changed. Helen may need me in the night, or I may hear news of Tom."

Ruth Fielding could not bear to remain idle. Unless she was constantly in action, her mind continued to dwell on the unfortunate details of the robbery and Tom's absence from Cameron Hall.

"I won't let myself think about it!" she told herself firmly.

But in spite of her decision, Ruth continued to worry. She could not help but think of Tom.

She backed her car out of the barn and drove to Cheslow. She stopped at the sheriff's office, but, as she had expected, there was nothing new concerning the bank theft. She paused at the garage and had her roadster carefully gone over by the mechanic. Satisfied that the motor was in perfect running order, she drove to Cameron Hall.

She tapped lightly on the screen door, but, as there was no response, quietly opened the door and went inside. Della, who was at Mr. Cameron's bedside, had not heard her knock. The nurse stepped out into the hallway for an instant to talk with Ruth.

"Miss Helen is asleep," she told Ruth. "Poor girl, she's nearly worn out."

"I won't disturb her. I just ran up to see if you needed me."

"Mr. Cameron remains about the same. I can see no change."

"Then you won't need me to-day?"

"No. The doctor feels certain the crisis isn't near at hand."

"Then I'll go back to the Red Mill and get a good sleep to-night. I'm dead tired." Ruth started to turn away, but paused.

She saw Helen coming down the stairway toward her.

"I wasn't asleep," and Helen smiled faintly. "I heard you come."

"You'd better go back to bed," Ruth told her. "There are dark circles under your eyes. You need sleep."

"I know I do. But I can't help worrying. I wanted to ask you something, Ruth. Chess hasn't been here all day. I telephoned, but I couldn't get him. Don't you think we ought to tell him—about Tom? Perhaps he can help us find him."

"Yes, I do," Ruth agreed. "If Tom hasn't returned by morning we must consult Chess."

"He usually comes up to the house every day to ask about father. I can't imagine why he hasn't come to-day."

"Don't worry about it, dear." Ruth was trying to comfort her chum. "Now I'm going back to the Red Mill, because I know you'll never go

upstairs and try to sleep if I stay here. I'll run over the first thing in the morning."

Ruth drove back to the Red Mill. She sat down in the living room near Aunt Alvirah and tried to read the newspaper. She was nervous and soon tossed aside the paper. The time dragged so slowly!

At nine o'clock she went to her own room, for she was tired. But in spite of her fatigue she found it impossible to go to sleep. She kept thinking of Tom and of his strange disappearance. In her mind she went over and over the details of the bank theft. Everything seemed a confused mass of disconnected facts. She could reach no logical conclusion—there seemed no solution to the problem.

Ruth heard the clock strike one—two—three o'clock. Toward morning she dozed off. It seemed that she had scarcely fallen asleep when suddenly she found herself wide awake. She sat upright in bed. She was certain she had heard a noise.

There came a second pounding on her bedroom door. There was no doubt about the noise this time.

"What is it?" she called anxiously.

The voice that reached her was that of Jabez Potter.

"Git up quick! The river's on the rampage!

The Red Mill's goin' to be washed away!"

"What?" Ruth could scarcely believe her ears.

Then she recalled what the farmer at Cheslow had said about the cloud-burst above them and that he had warned her of a possible flood. Her other troubles had crowded to the front, and she had forgotten.

"I'll be down in an instant," she called.

She was out of bed in a bound. She dressed herself with nervous haste.

Ruth stepped outside her room. It was still dark and there was no light in the hallway, for Jabez Potter had never seen the necessity of wiring the house for electricity.

In the kitchen, the miller was trying to find a lantern.

"Some one took my lantern," he fretted, "and jest when I need it worst. I left it right here by the kitchen sink, and now it's gone. And I can't find the matches!"

Ruth groped her way in the darkness and reached the cupboard where she knew the match box was kept. She struck a match, and instantly her keen eye detected the lantern.

"It's right under the sink where you left it," she told Jabez, as she hurried across the room to help him light it. By the time the lantern sent out its feeble gleam, Aunt Alvirah had reached the kitchen.

"Oh, my back! And, oh, my bones!" she groaned. "I never come down them steps so fast in my life! What in the world is goin' on?"

"We're goin' to be washed into the river!" the miller declared in a tense voice. "The water's runnin' over the back porch already. I woke up when I heard something strike the house. I got up and looked out the window. I saw the whole back yard flooded. And she's comin' higher every minute, too! We'll be lucky if we save anything!"

By this time Jabez had pulled on his heavy rubber boots. He opened the kitchen door. In the semi-darkness Ruth and Aunt Alvirah saw that the water was indeed sweeping the steps of the back porch.

One hasty glanced disclosed that an ugly, dirty stream of water was pouring across the yard, lapping against the side of the house. The water completely surrounded the hen-house.

"Oh, my poor chickens!" Aunt Alvirah moaned as she reached the porch. "They're shut up in the hen-house. They'll all drown."

"Uncle Jabez is going after them now," Ruth comforted her. "The water isn't very deep yet. Perhaps he can get them out for you."

They watched the miller as he splashed across the yard to the hen-house. He disappeared inside and a moment later reappeared with an arm

load of squawking chickens which he carried to the barn.

"The water won't reach 'em there—not unless the water keeps comin' up for the next three or four hours," he assured Aunt Alvirah as he splashed past the porch. "The water's comin' up fast, though."

Ruth hurried back into the kitchen and quickly lighted the lamp. She searched the clothes closet and pulled out an old pair of her uncle's rubber boots. She slipped off her shoes and began to pull on the heavy boots.

Aunt Alvirah offered a protest.

"You ain't goin' out there in all that water!" she said fearfully. "You'll drown!"

"The water isn't very deep yet, Aunt Alvirah, and Uncle Jabez needs my help. He can't get all those chickens out by himself."

The old woman offered no further protest, but from the porch watched anxiously as Ruth splashed through the water in the direction of the hen-house.

"Be careful!" she called after her shrilly.

The water came up nearly to the top of Ruth's rubber boots. Now that she was outside, she saw that the flood had been caused by the overflow of the creek, and not by the river. Trip after trip she made from the hen-house to the barn. At length the last chicken was rescued.

"The water's still comin' higher!" the miller groaned. "It's above my knees now!"

Ruth nodded and hurried back to the farmhouse. The water now covered the back porch, and a tiny stream was trickling through the kitchen. Aunt Alvirah had shut the kitchen door in the hope that by so doing she might keep back the water.

"And I scrubbed that floor the last thing before I went to bed," the old woman wailed as she watched the widening stream of dirty water course its way across the room.

"I don't believe there's much real danger," Ruth told her hopefully. "The flood is caused by the creek, and the water will soon empty into the river. Unless the river overflows its banks, we are safe." She glanced out of the window, but could see very little as it was still dark.

"The river's been up to the banks for most a week," Aunt Alvirah worried. "I've been tellin' Jabez we'd be flooded one of these days. It won't take much more water to make the river go over its banks."

"I know," Ruth admitted. "There isn't another farmhouse near Cheslow that's located as near the river as the Red Mill."

As Ruth talked, she quickly moved furniture from the kitchen to the sitting room, which was on a slightly higher level.

"This may help for a little while," Ruth said doubtfully. "If the water keeps coming higher, we can take the things upstairs."

Aunt Alvirah helped her move the articles of furniture as best she could, and not once did she complain of her back.

"There goes the chicken-house!" the old woman cried, a few minutes later.

Ruth rushed to the window just in time to see the hen-house float into the main channel of the river.

"Oh, dear," Aunt Alvirah sighed. "It seems like trouble never comes single. I wonder where your uncle is? He's so careless about takin' care of himself. He's liable to drown."

Ruth noticed the worried expression on Aunt Alvirah's face, and, to relieve her from anxiety, stepped out on the porch to look for Jabez Potter. Dawn was approaching and the sky was lighter. She saw her uncle standing waist deep in the flood, working furiously with the water-wheel at the edge of the river.

Ruth was alarmed.

"Come back!" she called out in warning.

A torrent of water was rushing over the wheel, threatening to tear it loose and carry it down the river. Jabez, in an effort to make the wheel more secure, had placed himself in a precarious situa-

tion. He too was in danger of being swept downstream.

"Come back!" Ruth called again. "You'll fall in!"

"I've got to fix this wheel," Jabez insisted stubbornly. "It'll be washed away if I don't."

"You can't fix it, Uncle Jabez! Not with all the water coming over. The wheel will hold. I don't believe the water will come any higher."

Reluctantly, the miller stepped back from the edge of the river. He was soaking wet. Ruth, too, was drenched to the waist.

"Please come back to the house," Ruth pleaded. "You're frightening Aunt Alvirah nearly to death. Anyway, you can't do anything with that wheel."

"I reckon you're right," the miller agreed. "But if my wheel goes out, I might jest as well close down business and go to the poorhouse!"

"The wheel is safe," Ruth told him again, as they reached the porch. "The high point of the flood has been reached, I'm sure, and now the water should go down rapidly."

"I don't know what ever made any one build so near this pesky river," Jabez Potter fumed. "It's always comin' up and ruinin' my crops and damaging my property."

Ruth made no reply, but scanned the sky. She

was relieved to observe that there were no rain clouds in evidence.

"I reckon the creek will go down in a few hours if it don't rain," the miller admitted. "The river is even to the banks, but I don't figger the water from the creek will be enough to make 'er overflow."

"Come inside the house and change into dry clothing," Ruth cautioned. "You'll catch your death of cold if you stand around."

"I reckon I've done everything I can. If the wheel washes away, I'll just have to watch her go."

Jabez Potter and Ruth splashed into the kitchen where Aunt Alvirah waited for them. The water had drained out of the kitchen, leaving a dirty film on the floor. Aunt Alvirah was energetically trying to mop up the slime.

"Don't bother about the floor," Ruth advised her. "I'll help you as soon as I get into some dry clothes."

The miller went to his room to change his wet garments, and Ruth, too, was soon in dry clothing. She returned to the kitchen and from the porch watched the torrent of water that swept through the back yard and emptied into the river.

Jabez set a stake at the edge of the river. At the end of an hour the three were gratified to find that the river water had not raised an inch.

The water from the creek was rapidly draining into the river.

The sun rose. Presently Ruth prepared a simple breakfast, and the three sat down to eat.

"Cheer up, Aunt Alvirah," Ruth begged. "It isn't a bit like you to worry. We've had a lot of trouble in the last twenty-four hours, but things can't keep on like this forever. The flood will go down and I feel sure you'll get your bank money again too."

"Do you really think so?" and the old lady brightened. "I dunno what makes me take it so hard."

Ruth did not answer Aunt Alvirah's question. She spoke with a confidence she did not entirely feel. She had never been more discouraged in her life.

She straightened in her chair Ruth was determined that she would not allow discouragement to overcome her. Things would come out all right, just as she had promised Aunt Alvirah. She would make them come out that way!

CHAPTER IX

CLEWS

As SOON as breakfast was over, Ruth and Aunt Alvirah turned their attention to cleaning up the kitchen. Although Ruth was tired from lack of sleep, she flew at the work with energy.

The miller put on his rubber boots and set out to investigate the extent of the damage from the flood of the night. The sun had come out brightly and the day promised to be a beautiful one. It seemed almost unbelievable that the ordeal of the night had been anything but a nightmare.

"This is hard on your uncle," Aunt Alvirah said to Ruth as soon as the miller was out of the house. "He's had so much trouble—losin' the money and everything."

She sank down wearily into the nearest chair. It was not her own trouble, but the trouble of others that gave Aunt Alvirah Boggs the most concern.

A half hour passed. Then the door opened

and the miller came into the kitchen leaving a trail of mud on the clean floor.

"The flood could have been a lot worse," he announced almost cheerfully. "My crops weren't hurt much. The water didn't stay up long enough to do much damage."

"The hen-house is gone," Aunt Alvirah reminded him. "I dunno what I'll do with my chickens."

"The hen-house is lodged against a tree about a hundred rods from the house. I can haul it back to-day, I guess."

"Did anything else wash away?" Ruth questioned.

"Not that I know of. My pigs is all safe—I counted 'em."

"Then the flood really wasn't so bad, after all."

"It was bad enough!" the miller grumbled. "It'll take me a week to clean up the place and git my water wheel to workin' right again."

Ruth dropped down into a chair. She was tired. She was still fatigued from the long journey across the continent. It seemed to her she could go to bed and sleep a week. Aunt Alvirah noticed her expression.

"You'd better go to bed, my pretty," she urged.

"I can't take time now, Aunt Alvirah. I must run over to Cameron Hall right away and see how things went there last night. Mr. Cameron

was doing well when I left, but he may have taken an unexpected turn for the worse. In that case Helen will need my help. Also, I want to see if there is any news of Tom. Some strange things have been happening, Aunt Alvirah. I wish I could understand——" she broke off thoughtfully.

"If you're goin' to Cheslow stop at Briggs hardware store and buy me some heavy wire and some tenpenny nails," Jabez Potter put in. "I've got to fix the fence and I'll have to git at that wheel as soon as the water goes down."

"And if you have time, you might stop at the sheriff's office and see if they've caught the thieves," Aunt Alvirah suggested timidly.

"They'll never catch 'em!" Jabez insisted harshly. "Our money's gone, and we might as well make up our minds to it. They ought to make a law against allowin' savings banks to operate."

By eight o'clock Ruth was speeding along the road to Cheslow. At the railway tracks she was forced to wait until the morning local pulled out of the station and left the crossing clear.

Ruth watched the passengers get on and off the train. She was surprised to see two strange young men swing from the steps to the station platform.

"I wonder who they are?" the girl of the Red

Mill asked herself speculatively. "I'm certain I never saw them before."

The two men did not have the appearance of traveling salesmen, Ruth decided. They were well dressed. Ruth watched them closely.

There was no reason why the arrival of two strangers in Cheslow should cause her alarm, and yet for some reason she felt nervous and decided that these men were to cause her future trouble.

"I guess I'm overwrought and fanciful." Ruth shrugged her shoulders and tried to dismiss the matter. "I declare, a molehill looks like a mountain to me."

The train pulled out of the station, and as Ruth continued to the sheriff's office she promptly forgot the two strangers. As she had expected, the sheriff had accomplished little.

"Nothing new, Miss Fielding," Si Perkins told her. "There doesn't seem to be a trace of the rascals, and we've searched the entire countryside. But we'll get 'em all right."

From the sheriff's office Ruth went to the hardware store to attend to the errand for her uncle. News of the flood had spread, and Ruth was delayed by many curious townspeople who questioned her concerning the happenings of the night.

Other farms along the creek had been flooded, she learned, though to a less extent. The Red

Mill, situated as it was, at the very point where the creek emptied into the river, had received the full force of the overflow.

Escaping those who would have detained her with more questions, Ruth returned to her roadster and drove out to Cameron Hall. She was eager to see Helen, for unless Tom had returned home, his disappearance was indeed serious.

As she approached Cameron Hall she noticed that another automobile was parked just outside the big iron gate.

"Wonder whose car it is?" she asked herself. "I hope it's Chess's. I want to see him."

Ruth parked her own car near the gate. Now that she was closer to the other automobile she saw at a glance that it did not belong to Chess Copley. It was a somewhat battered automobile.

"I imagine the car was rented from one of the garages at Cheslow." Ruth reasoned.

She sprang quickly from her own roadster and hurried up the path.

"It's possible that some one has brought news of Tom!" The thought flashed through her mind and caused her to increase her pace.

For the first twenty feet, the tall trees in the yard blotted out the view of Cameron Hall. Then the path took an abrupt turn, and Ruth caught a glimpse of the front porch.

Two men were standing on the veranda. They were strangers to Ruth.

But were they strangers? Surely, she had seen them somewhere. Ruth stopped short in the path and stared. Then she remembered.

"I'm certain they're the two men I saw get off the train at Cheslow," she decided. "I wonder what they want here at Cameron Hall? I'll venture they're not here for any good!"

Ruth hurried on toward the house as fast as she could walk, as that seemed the only way of answering the questions that now troubled her.

She saw the door of the Cameron residence open, and then saw Helen come out on the porch. The men spoke to her, and for a minute the three talked earnestly together. Ruth was too far away to hear what was said.

But she did see that Helen instinctively drew back from the two strangers and stepped in front of the door as though to bar entrance.

"We're detectives from the city! We're here to see Mr. Tom Cameron!"

Helen, who had opened the door of the Cameron residence in response to the summons, stared in amazement at the two men who confronted her. There was no denying the identity of the two strangers, for their badges were plainly visible.

"But I don't understand," Helen gasped

faintly, without making a move to open the door wider. "Why should you want my brother?"

At this instant, Ruth Fielding, who had observed the men from a distance, reached the veranda, slightly out of breath. The two detectives turned, and Helen, seeing her chum, gave a sigh of relief.

"Oh, Ruth!"

"What's the matter, Helen?"

"These men want to see Tom! They're detectives, Ruth!"

"Detectives!"

So it had come to this! Suspicion had centered upon Tom.

Ruth was noted for her ability to remain cool and calm when others were excited. Now, as she spoke, she gave no indication of her true feelings.

"I suppose it's about the bank robbery," she said, gazing straight at the two detectives. "I believe Mr. Cameron did have considerable money in the Farmers Savings Bank."

"Well, that isn't what we came to find out," one of the men snapped. "It's about a car of his. Hasn't he a blue roadster?"

Helen waited for Ruth to reply.

"Yes, I believe he has," the girl returned dryly. "Of course, other people have blue roadsters too."

"Well, Miss, we don't wish to make an un-

pleasant scene, but we must see Tom Cameron!"

Helen glanced timidly at Ruth, and the latter gave her a sign. Ruth knew that it was useless to try to keep the truth from the two men.

"Tom isn't here," Helen blurted out.

"Where is he?" The question was sharp.

"I don't know. He didn't come home night before last. I'm terribly worried."

The detectives exchanged significant glances.

"May we search the house, Miss Cameron?" one of them asked politely.

Ruth nodded for her to comply with the request. Helen swung open the door.

"I'll show you his room," she promised, "if you'll please not make any noise. My father is dangerously ill."

The four entered the house. After a brief examination of the living rooms downstairs, the party climbed the stairs to Tom's room. Helen opened the door and the four entered. Everything was as Ruth had last seen it. Nothing had been touched.

"We're sorry to make you so much trouble when your father is sick," one of the detectives apologized, not unkindly, "but business is business, you know, and we're hired to run down clews."

"Your brother's disappearance at this time looks bad," the second detective added.

"I can't understand what has happened to Tom, but it's ridiculous for any one to suspect him of stealing the money!" Ruth defended him loyally. "Why should he want the bank money when he has plenty in his own name?"

"Tom never took a cent in his life that didn't belong to him!" Helen put in proudly. "The Camerons are honest!"

"I don't doubt that. We're not saying he took it. We're merely investigating. You don't mind if we look around?"

"Go as far as you like," Helen said crossly. "You won't find anything."

Ruth took hold of her chum's hand and squeezed it comfortingly. Nothing so provoked Helen as an unjust suggestion that a member of her family was at fault.

The two men busied themselves in the room. They missed nothing. They examined the bed, they went through the papers in the desk, they looked into the clothes closet. Presently the one of them who served as the spokesman turned to Ruth with a question.

"Mr. Cameron is the treasurer of the Fielding Film Company, is he not?"

"He is," Ruth replied politely, but without offering additional information.

"I'm told he has been hard pressed for funds.

That he has mismanaged this Miss Fielding's finances."

"Who says that?" Ruth demanded sharply. "I'm Miss Fielding, and Mr. Cameron is accountable to me only for the way the company money is spent!"

"You are Miss Fielding?" The two detectives looked at Ruth in surprise and admiration.

The flattering glance did not please Ruth.

"The company funds have never been mismanaged," she stated firmly. "Of course, any one that knows anything about a moving picture company knows that there are times when a producer has his money tied up and needs ready cash. But the only money I've ever lost is my forty thousand in the Farmers Savings Bank!"

"We weren't saying that we believed Mr. Cameron had mismanaged your affairs," the detective hastened to apologize. "However, it's possible that he has lost money unknown to you and that he was seeking to repay it."

"It isn't possible! We don't run the Fielding Film Company in such a sloppy way!"

It was Helen's turn to give her chum's hand a tiny squeeze of approval.

"You seem to think we're trying to hide something," Helen said. "Goodness knows we'd be grateful if you'd just find Tom for us."

Ruth remained silent and walked to the win-

dow. She glanced down over the well-kept lawn and her eyes rested upon the garage. Helen was not quite right. For Tom's sake, there was something that must be hidden. Would the detectives think to search the garage?

"If I'd only taken that sweater and cap with me when I discovered them!" she blamed herself. "But I never dreamed any one would accuse Tom!"

She thought of stealing down the stairs and out to the garage. Perhaps she could get the garments and dispose of them before the detectives found them.

"I can't do that," she reasoned. "They would surely be suspicious if I left the room. Maybe they won't think of the garage."

But from the systematic manner in which the two detectives examined the bedroom, it was evident that only by chance would they overlook the garage.

"Strikes me he left the house of his own accord," one of the detectives grunted after a time. "There's no evidence of a struggle in the room. His clothing is all here, Miss Cameron?"

"Nothing is missing in his room that I know of."

The detective walked over to the window and looked closely at the ledge. Then his eye fastened upon the garage.

"How about his car? Is his blue roadster in the garage?"

Ruth felt her heart sink.

"I—I'm afraid the car's missing, too," Helen stammered.

"Ah——" The detective looked sharply at the two girls. "You didn't tell me that at first."

"You didn't ask!" snapped back Ruth.

She was provoked, and with difficulty kept her temper. The irony of the questions! Already she could see where they were leading. It was all so unfair, so unjust. Tom was innocent, and yet these detectives were skillfully collecting evidence against him! And in a courtroom such evidence would impress a jury.

"You'll find nothing in the garage except maybe some old clothes," Helen told the two men.

The detectives exchanged glances again and smiled knowingly.

"Just the same, I think we'll have a look for ourselves. Will you lead the way, Miss Cameron?"

CHAPTER X

INCRIMINATING EVIDENCE

OUTWARDLY, Ruth Fielding remained her usual composed self, but her heart beat faster at the announcement made by the two detectives. If only she had anticipated this search of the garage! And she was helpless to prevent it!

"Certainly, I'll lead the way," Helen told the two detectives. "I have nothing to hide. Please don't make any noise on the stairway."

The four left Tom Cameron's room and Helen carefully closed the door behind them. Ruth gave no indication that the investigation disturbed her, but followed the two detectives down the stairs.

As they tiptoed past Mr. Cameron's room, they heard a low moan of pain. Helen stopped. Involuntarily she took a step toward the room. Then as quickly she checked herself and turned an agonized face toward Ruth.

"Never mind, dear, about going to the garage," Ruth said in a low tone, hoping to spare her

chum the ordeal which she knew was to follow. "You stay with your father. I'll go with the detectives."

"No, I want to go!" Helen was determined.

Resolutely, she walked by her father's room and outside on to the porch. Ruth and the detectives followed.

The two detectives made a brief examination of the ground under the window of Tom's room, as Ruth had done. Silently, the girls watched them. Satisfied that there were no additional clews to be found here, the four crossed the lawn to the garage.

"Has your brother appeared to worry about anything recently?" one detective thought to question Helen.

"Of course, we've both worried dreadfully about father ever since we received the telegram calling us home."

"I mean financial trouble."

"Why, not that I know of. Tom did seem bothered about something though, even before we started east from Hollywood. Of course, father has been worried about some investments, and it's possible that he had told Tom. With this bank failure on top of everything else, we've lost considerable."

The detective nodded his head, as though the

information threw new light on the mysterious disappearance of Tom Cameron.

"They don't care what they prove, as long as they prove something!" Ruth thought in disgust. "They accept a remote possibility almost as a definite fact. Well, if they think they can push this bank affair off on Tom, they'll have me to reckon with!"

Yet, just what she could do, Ruth did not know. She understood even more clearly than did Helen that slowly but surely a net of circumstantial evidence was closing in upon Tom.

Helen, sincere in her belief that her brother was innocent and that the garage could give up no incriminating clews, did not hesitate as she led the way to the building at the far end of the Cameron grounds. Ruth lagged behind. She knew only too well what a search of the garage might disclose.

"Here we are," Helen said, and swung back the door of the garage. "You see, his car has disappeared too."

"So I observe," came the dry response. "There is a room above the garage, is there not?"

"Yes, our hired man lives there. He's been with us for nearly ten years. You may see his room if you like."

"I guess there's no need," the detective re-

turned, apparently satisfied with Helen's statement. "We don't mean to intrude upon your privacy, but you understand we must leave no stone unturned."

The detectives glanced about the garage and seemed about ready to leave when one of them noticed the clothes closet. Helen was looking in the other direction, but Ruth, who had watched every move of the two men with fear and apprehension, saw the expression. The detective took a step in the direction of the closet.

"He'll find it!" Ruth told herself desperately.

She was standing in the doorway of the garage, and now her eyes wandered hopefully about the grounds. She turned toward the house, and was surprised to see a man coming up the path from the road. Inspiration seized Ruth.

"Some one is coming down the path!" she exclaimed. "A young man, too! I wonder if it can be Tom?"

Helen ran to the garage door and eagerly turned her eyes toward the house where Ruth pointed. The detective, who already had his hand on the latch of the closet door, came over and stood beside the two girls.

"Oh, that isn't Tom!" Helen wilted, but instantly she brightened. "It's Chess! I'm so glad he's come! I haven't seen him for two whole days, and I've been so busy with father, I haven't

had time to telephone him. I wonder where he's been? Perhaps he knows what's happened to Tom."

Helen waved to Chess, and the young man hurried across the lawn to the garage. He glanced inquiringly at the two detectives.

"Have you seen Tom?" Helen demanded anxiously.

"Tom? Isn't he here?" Chess was startled. "I wasn't in town yesterday. I just ran over now to apologize for not letting you know. You see, I was called away on business for my uncle. He wanted me to go to the city and look after some notes for him. I tried to telephone you, but the nurse said you were asleep. So I just hopped the first train, and hurried back as fast as I could."

"Oh, Chess, so much has happened since you left! Everything has gone wrong."

"Your father——"

"No, he seems to be resting fairly well. But these men are detectives from the city, and they want to see Tom! It's about the bank robbery! And Tom has disappeared."

"We're after a man that escaped in a blue roadster," Chess was informed by the detectives. "He was seen wearing a red sweater and a plaid cap."

"I'm sure Tom isn't the one you want," Chess declared promptly.

Disregarding the presence of the two detectives, Chess slipped a protecting arm about Helen. He smiled down into her tired face. Helen returned the smile. Now that Chess had arrived, her troubles were slipping away. After all, the detectives had no real evidence against Tom!

"I suppose we may as well go," one of the detectives announced.

"Just a minute. I want to have a look at this clothes closet."

The second detective turned and left the group. There was no stopping him now, Ruth knew. She watched him as he entered the garage and opened the closet door.

He tossed out a slicker and a pair of dirty overalls. Then he gave a low exclamation of surprise and dragged another article to the light.

It was the red sweater.

He dived again into the closet and brought out a plaid cap. The articles were held up before the astonished faces of those who stood in the doorway.

"I guess we have all the evidence we need!" The detective's voice was harsh and determined.

CHAPTER XI

A TURN FOR THE WORSE

HELEN and Chess stared blankly at the sweater and cap which the detective dangled in front of their eyes. There was no denying the character of the evidence against Tom.

"Oh, my brother can't be guilty!" Helen moaned. "I don't believe he did it!"

The girl buried her head on Ruth's shoulder and sobbed hysterically. Lack of sleep had gradually worn her down, and she was nervous and tired. The worry caused by her father's illness, the bank failure, Tom's mysterious disappearance, and now the suggestion that her brother had taken a part in the burglary, was a load almost too heavy for her to endure without giving evidence of the strain.

Ruth tried to console her chum, although she needed consolation herself.

"Of course he isn't guilty! Tom is absolutely trustworthy!" She turned to the two detectives. "As the treasurer of my film company he handles

many thousands of dollars, and I would trust him with anything!"

The two men glanced at each other. Ruth Fielding's name carried weight, and without question she was sincere in her belief that Tom Cameron was innocent.

"In your moving picture business, you've undoubtedly learned to judge character accurately," one of the detectives said politely. "However, one can't always tell about these young fellows. It looks to me as though your friend must have hidden the sweater and cap in this closet for the sole purpose of escaping detection."

"It's possible some one else put the clothes there," Ruth suggested quietly.

"Possible, but not likely."

Ruth hesitated. Should she tell the detectives she had found the garments and had stuffed them into the closet? She had hidden the clothing because she had hoped that by so doing she would prevent unpleasant and unjust speculation. Instead, her act seemed to have brought additional suspicion upon Tom's head.

Ruth was no coward She was not afraid to face the unpleasant questions of the detectives. Now that the sweater and cap had been found, there was no longer any need for secrecy.

"Tom couldn't have put the sweater and cap

in the closet," she stated firmly, turning to the two men. "I put them there myself!"

"You?" The four gazed at her in utter disbelief.

Ruth smiled. It seemed to her that the expression on their faces was the first funny thing she had seen in weeks. She sobered instantly.

"I did a little detective work myself. I found the sweater and cap on the floor of the garage—right out in plain sight. I stuck them in the closet myself."

"Ah, then you did think Mr. Cameron guilty?" the detective fired the question at her.

"No. And I haven't changed my mind since! If you ask my opinion, I believe that some one deliberately planted the clothes in the garage."

"To make it appear as though Tom were guilty!" Helen finished quickly.

"It stands to reason," Ruth went on. "Any one with sense wouldn't leave the clothes out in the open so that the first person to enter the garage would see them. That is—not unless they wanted the garments to be found!"

"That's right!" Chess agreed.

The detectives appeared to be impressed with Ruth's argument, and one of them nodded his head thoughtfully.

"There may be something in what you say," he agreed. "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll

take these duds along with us and go find that fellow that saw the roadster. Bill Jones is his name, I believe."

"Let's go along!" Ruth cried.

"My car is down by the gate," Chess said. "Come on, Helen. We won't be gone long, and Della can look after your father for a few minutes."

"Yes, I want to go. I can't rest until Tom's innocence is proved."

The five left the garage and went down the path to the outside gate where the automobiles were parked. The two detectives climbed into their own car. Ruth and Helen were to ride with Chess.

Just as Chess stepped on the starter, Helen pointed to another automobile coming down the road toward them.

"Isn't that Bill Jones?"

Chess gave the car one glance.

"Sure enough. It's Bill's old tank. You can tell that rattle-trap a mile away."

He sprang from the car and motioned to the detectives to wait.

"Not so fast!" he called. "I think this is Jones coming now, and I'll stop him."

Chess stepped out into the middle of the road, and, as the car approached, waved his arms for

the man to slow down. The car gave a last protesting wheeze and came to a standstill.

"Well, young feller, wha' d' you want?"

Bill Jones scarcely could have been considered one of Cheslow's leading citizens. He was always shiftless, always somewhat dirty, and always in need of a shave. Yet, in his own line, he was without a peer. He knew the best fishing places, and during the hunting season he was envied by every man in the community. Bill always paid his debts, and was considered reliable.

By this time Ruth and Helen and the detectives had reached the side of the car. One of the detectives spoke up.

"You're Bill Jones?"

"Yeh, that's me."

"Did you ever see these before?" The sweater and cap were held up for his inspection.

"Did I ever see 'em? By cracky, them's it! I seen that feller in the blue car wearin' 'em."

"Where were you when you saw the car?"

"I was just comin' through town with my fishin' tackle. It was a little after midnight, I reckon."

"After midnight? And you were walking through town with your fishing tackle?" The detective smiled doubtfully.

"Sure!" Bill disposed of the question with one scornful look. "Maybe you city fellers don't

know. That's when the fish bite best—at night. Well, anyway, I was on my way home, 'cause the skeeters had been bitin' harder than the fish. Just as I went past the bank, I seen a blue car start up sudden like."

"How many were in the roadster?"

"I couldn't make out for certain. Maybe there was two or three—I dunno. Anyway, I seen this guy in the red sweater."

"Which way did the car go?"

"Headed east. Down this here road. I didn't think nothin' about it at the time."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. I guess that's all."

"Ain't caught the feller yet, have you?"

"Not yet, but we're on his trail."

"Well, if I can be of any service to you fellers, just call on me." Bill gave the detectives a grand smile and tipped his tattered hat to Ruth and Helen. "Young feller, if you'll give that crank a turn, I'll be on my way."

Chess obligingly cranked the car, and Bill Jones was soon hidden in a cloud of dust.

"We're no nearer the truth than we ever were," Helen choked.

She leaned her head weakly against the side of Chess's car. Ruth went to her.

Chess made a feeble effort to say something cheerful.

"You can't tell anything from what Bill says.

He likes to be in the limelight. He's always seeing things."

"His testimony supports our theory," the detective said tersely. "I'm afraid it will be my duty to run Mr. Cameron down and——"

He broke off as though he wished to spare Helen and Ruth the pain of hearing the words. Chess thrust his hands into his pocket and gazed despondently down the road.

"Run him down?" Helen lifted her head. "I wish we could find him! Then everything would clear up!"

She turned to Ruth as though expecting her to reaffirm the statement, but the girl of the Red Mill was silent. She was not looking at her chum, nor did she appear to have heard.

Ruth's eyes were focused upon a woman in white who had passed through the gate and was coming toward the group. It was Della, the nurse.

"Send for Dr. Davison, quick!" she called. "Mr. Cameron is worse!"

CHAPTER XII

THE CRISIS

"MR. CAMERON is excited again. I left him with that new hired girl, but she's afraid to stay with him alone. I must go right back to the house!"

The old nurse, having delivered her message, turned and hurried back toward Cameron Hall, leaving Ruth, Helen, and Chess standing speechless at the roadside.

"Oh, Ruth," Helen moaned, clinging helplessly to her chum, "I can't stand any more! I just can't!"

"Brace up, Helen." Chess awkwardly patted her hand. He wanted to say the right thing, but was at a loss for the words.

"It may be the crisis approaching," Ruth tried to comfort her chum. "In that case, it's likely he'll take a turn for the better."

Helen straightened.

"I'm acting foolishly," she accused herself.

"But I'm over it now! I guess I'm just—nervous."

"Chess, jump in your car and go after Dr. Davison!" Ruth directed. "And hurry!"

"I'll burn up the road!" Eager for an opportunity to help, Chess sprang into the roadster and was off.

The two detectives looked at each other a trifle shamefacedly, as though they realized they were largely responsible for Helen's present state, which was almost that of collapse. Silently, they made their way to their own automobile.

"Come, dear." Ruth Fielding took her chum by the hand. Helen, aroused to action, started with her toward the house. They sped across the lawn and reached the porch only a minute behind the nurse.

Mr. Cameron was tossing restlessly from one side of the bed to the other, his hands working nervously at the covers. As the girls entered the darkened bedroom, his movements ceased for an instant.

"Tom," he mumbled, "is that you?"

Mr. Cameron's feverish eyes stared at Ruth and Helen but without recognition. The girls went to him and tried to quiet him. Their efforts were almost useless.

Time dragged slowly. There was a step in the hall.

The door opened softly, and in relief the girls saw that it was Dr. Davison. They stepped back from the bedside to make room for him. He glanced at the patient, opened his case and took out a thermometer.

"Hm," he announced, as he read it, after removing it from Mr. Cameron's mouth an instant later. "Temperature seems to be dropping. That means the crisis is approaching."

"Can I help?" Ruth asked quickly.

"Yes, Miss Fielding, we'll need you. Our nurse didn't come, but with you on hand we'll get along all right."

"I'll run down to the Red Mill for a looser gown and to let Aunt Alvirah know that I can't get home to-night. You won't need me here for a few minutes, will you?"

"No, I'll stay with Mr. Cameron myself until after your return." The doctor busied himself with his black leather case. "Have you been giving him the medicine I left?"

"Every hour," Helen replied. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"I think you'd better go to bed and to sleep, young lady," Dr. Davison returned kindly. "You'll be sick yourself if you aren't careful."

Helen shook her head.

"Do you think it would be wise to call in an-

other doctor to assist when the crisis comes?" she suggested.

"Yes, Miss Cameron. If you wish I'll call in a colleague."

"I wish you would! Don't spare expense—just get father safely through it!"

"I'll do my best," Dr. Davison replied grimly.

Ruth stole quietly from the room to the hallway. Dr. Davison followed her out of earshot, and addressed her.

"Miss Ruth, I'll be depending upon you tonight. It's absolutely essential that the patient be kept quiet. There must be no excitement. Mr. Cameron is in grave danger and scarcely strong enough to meet the crisis. I didn't tell Helen, for she seems near the point of a breakdown."

"You mean—Mr. Cameron won't safely pass the crisis?"

"That I can't say. It will be a hard fight. If you can, induce Helen to go to bed."

"I'll try it, but I'm afraid she won't leave the bedside."

"Oh, by the way, Ruth, where is Tom Cameron? He should be here."

"If we only knew, Dr. Davison! He's disappeared and we can't find him."

"That's what I was told down at Cheslow; but I didn't believe it. I've always known Tom. Thought him to be a bright, honest chap."

"He is!" Ruth insisted.

The doctor returned to the bedroom and Ruth slipped from the big house and ran down the path to her roadster.

At the Red Mill, Ruth quickly gathered together a few articles which she would need at Cameron Hall. She returned to the kitchen and snatched a bite to eat from the cupboard.

"I won't be home again until to-morrow," she informed Aunt Alvirah. "Mr. Cameron is worse and they need me there."

"It's enough to make him worse—what they're tellin' down at Cheslow about that son of his," Uncle Jabez grunted.

"And what are they saying?" Ruth demanded sharply.

"Well, they figger maybe he done it—took the bank money. There ain't another blue car in the county like that one he gads about in."

"Uncle Jabez, do *you* believe Tom took the money?"

"Well, I didn't say as I did, and I didn't say as I didn't. I never had nothin' agin the feller."

"Never mind, my pretty," Aunt Alvirah hastened to say. "Your uncle knows Tom didn't take the money."

Ruth gave the old lady an appreciative hug and ran back to her car, which she had left at the

roadside. Ten minutes later she was on duty at Cameron Hall.

The day dragged slowly. Each hour Ruth carefully recorded Mr. Cameron's condition on a chart. Toward evening, Dr. Evans, a young physician from Cheslow, arrived and consulted with Dr. Davison. Della had left the patient in Ruth's hands and had gone to her room for a much needed sleep, but Helen refused to leave her father.

The hours wore on. At regular intervals Ruth took Mr. Cameron's temperature and his pulse rate. There was no doubt that the crisis was approaching, for the signs were unmistakable. Mr. Cameron continued to toss restlessly on his bed, and neither Ruth nor Helen could quiet him.

"I wish the doctors would hurry back," Helen commented anxiously, and stepped outside upon the porch to look down the road.

The closing of the door attracted Mr. Cameron's attention. He coughed and half-raised himself in bed.

"Tom, that you?" he mumbled. "Need your help. That last investment—Consolidated Chemical—hard pressed for money."

Startled, Ruth pushed him gently back against the pillow. She was glad indeed that Helen had not heard the words. Had Tom known that his

father was in urgent need of funds? Ruth asked herself. Was that what had worried him?

Helen returned a moment later and resumed a seat at her father's bedside. A half hour slipped by. Shortly after six o'clock, Dr. Davison and Dr. Evans arrived. They examined the chart Ruth handed them, and discussed it.

An hour passed. Obviously, Mr. Cameron was much weaker.

"It's going to be a hard battle," Dr. Davison said quietly. "Are you girls certain you can stand the strain—and not give way to your feelings?"

Both Ruth and Helen nodded grimly.

The next few hours were a nightmare. The fight to save Mr. Cameron's life was a desperate though silent one. Stimulants were administered at regular intervals. Dr. Evans had brought an oxygen tank with him, and as Mr. Cameron's breathing became more labored, he was encouraged to inhale through the tube.

The clock in the hall struck one. Even before Dr. Davison pushed back his chair from the bed, Ruth sensed that the critical moment had arrived. She felt Helen's cold hand steal into her own.

"The crisis?" Ruth whispered tensely.

Dr. Evans nodded, and silently bent over the patient.

CHAPTER XIII

RUTH TAKES ACTION

UNQUESTIONABLY, a change had come over Mr. Cameron. His breathing was slower and less labored and his temperature had dropped almost to normal. Helen, peering down at the white face on the pillow, was frightened and turned questioning eyes upon Dr. Davison.

"It's all right, Miss Cameron. The crisis is safely over. He's out of danger. You and Miss Fielding had better go to bed. The nurse will relieve you."

Now that the strain was over, Ruth suddenly realized that she was very tired. Every muscle in her body seemed to ache. The last twenty-four hours had been one continuous ordeal.

Mr. Cameron was sleeping peacefully, and there was no need for Ruth and Helen to remain now that the danger was over.

As soon as the two doctors had departed and Della had taken her place at the bedside, Ruth

and Helen crept to their rooms, thankful for an opportunity to sleep.

"Things are beginning to clear up already," Ruth said cheerfully as she told her chum good-night. "Go right to sleep. Don't worry."

Ruth entered the room assigned to her and closed the door. Then she flung herself upon the bed and cried a little. Presently, she forced herself to get up and undress. She turned out the light and went to bed, but she did not sleep. Thoughts crowded rampant through her tired brain.

Oh, if only Tom were back home! If only she could tell him her thoughts! Tell him that she loved him more dearly than anything in the world!

"I never realized how much he meant to me until he disappeared," she repeated to herself over and over. "I can't stand it if anything happens to him. If only he were back, I'd be willing to give up the moving picture business. My work doesn't mean anything without Tom to help and encourage me!"

Never before, even to herself, had Ruth admitted that her profession was of less consequence than her love for Tom Cameron. But for that matter, never had the girl of the Red Mill passed through such a trying ordeal.

It was nearly morning before Ruth fell into a troubled slumber. When she awoke, her mind

was more at rest. It seemed to her that she now saw her way clear. To get at the bottom of the mystery was the first problem that faced her.

After she had found Tom and had explained to every one's satisfaction the mysterious disappearance of the blue roadster—well, there was time enough later to think about that.

"I don't care if it takes every cent I have, I'll prove that Tom didn't take the bank money!" she determined. "Even if I work day and night, I'll solve the mystery!"

Now that her mind was definitely made up, Ruth was anxious to lose no time. Giving her hair a last hasty brushing, she hurried downstairs.

"I had no idea it was after eight o'clock," she apologized to Helen. "I guess I was dead tired —and I just didn't wake up. How is your father?"

"He's resting comfortably and looks so much better! I'm sure he'll get along all right. Now if I were only certain that Tom is safe my worries would be over."

"Helen, I'm going to get Chess to help me, and we'll find Tom if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Oh, Ruth, you've done so much for me already. But if you can find Tom, I'll be your everlasting slave!"

Ruth smiled at the character of Helen's grati-

tude. Before she had time to reply, there was a gentle tap on the front door and an instant later Chess Copley stood in front of the two girls.

"Chess!" Ruth cried eagerly. "You're just the one I wanted to see! Will you help me find Tom?"

"Will I? That's just what I came over for. I'm pretty hot under my collar at what folks are saying."

"Let's talk it over at breakfast," Helen suggested. "The toast is getting cold."

"I've had one breakfast," Chess admitted, "but I guess I can eat another—if Helen cooked it."

"Well, I didn't."

The three sat down at the table, and as they ate breakfast discussed the situation. Helen's fears were somewhat quieted by Chess, who assured her that Tom would certainly be found.

"Have you any definite clew?" Chess asked Ruth.

"No, I haven't, Chess. It's the strangest disappearance I ever heard of. But it's clear that Tom or some one else has taken the roadster. Where, we don't know. That's what we must find out."

"The car ought to be easy to trace because it's an especially classy little vehicle. And, too, the color is rather unusual, silvery blue."

"That's what I thought. My idea is to start out this morning in the car and see what we can discover for ourselves. If we wait until the sheriff and his posse get busy, we'll wait forever."

"I agree with you there, Ruth. I'm ready to start any time you are."

The three hurriedly finished their breakfast, and Ruth and Chess left the house.

"I wish I could go along," Helen said regretfully, "but I can't leave father."

"Of course not," Ruth returned. "Don't worry. We'll certainly find some trace of Tom."

Ruth firmly believed that the search would reveal some clew to the mystery. It seemed unbelievable that Tom could disappear without leaving some evidence of his flight.

"We may as well take my car," Chess announced. "It's filled with gas and all ready to go."

"All right," Ruth agreed. "Which way shall we go?"

"Down this road, I suppose. That's the direction Bill Jones said the blue roadster took."

"Perhaps it wasn't Tom's car he saw. Well, if we don't have any luck on this road, we can try another direction. By the way, have you heard anything new about the bank robbery?"

"Not much. The sheriff investigated these roads some, but didn't find any trace of the men.

They're sort of poking fun at him down at Cheslow because of his finger-print idea."

"I should think they would! But what I wanted to know is whether you have heard any one saying anything about Tom."

"Of course they wouldn't say much to me, because I'm his friend." So Chess tried to evade the question.

"But you have heard things?"

"Well, yes, I have, Ruth. But you know how people in a small town are—always ready to jump at anything that makes good talking. As far as I'm concerned, I don't believe Tom would do a dirty trick like that even if he was hard pressed for money."

"Chess, I couldn't help but think about it last night. Even if we find Tom, do you know what it means?"

Chess nodded soberly.

"It's likely to mean those detectives will pounce down and arrest him."

"If circumstantial evidence counts, they have a case against Tom already. It worries me dreadfully, Chess. I didn't say anything about it in front of Helen because I didn't want to add to her alarm."

"Poor kid, she can't stand much more."

"But I know Tom is innocent!" Ruth went on. "I don't believe he would deliberately hide! If

we find him I'm certain he can explain everything."

"It's going to be a job to find him, Ruth I haven't much of an idea how to go about it."

"We can stop at the farmhouses and ask people if they saw the blue roadster."

"That's an idea, Ruth. Here's a promising looking house. Let's stop."

Chess drove into the farmyard and they climbed out. A few questions directed to the housewife soon convinced them that there was nothing to be learned. All morning they drove along the Red Mill road, but always when they questioned the farmers, the answer was the same.

No one had seen a blue roadster, nor had they any helpful information to give.

"These farmers sleep so soundly, they wouldn't hear a cyclone, let alone a car," Chess grumbled, as they drove back toward Cheslow for luncheon.

"Want to quit, Chess?"

"Not on your life! I'll be back on the spot as soon as I've had something to eat."

Ruth reported to Helen the results of the trip, and then drove her own car to the Red Mill. She was somewhat discouraged, but had no thought of abandoning the search.

" 'Pears like you ain't never at home since you come back," Aunt Alvirah said wistfully, as Ruth

took leave of her, shortly after she had snatched a few bites to eat.

"I'm neglecting you shamefully," Ruth apologized. "I don't mean to be always on the go. As soon as this bank affair is straightened out, I'll be only too happy to camp on the doorstep."

"It don't do no good to be gadding around," Uncle Jabez insisted. "It jest uses up gasoline! The sheriff can't find them fellers, and I reckon you can't. The money's gone!"

"I'm not thinking entirely about the money, Uncle Jabez. I'm thinking about Tom. I'd rather lose my forty thousand any day than him!"

"You're plumb crazy!"

Ruth met Chess at Cameron Hall shortly after one o'clock and the search was resumed. They took another direction, and, as before, questioned the persons who lived along the road.

The afternoon wore slowly away, and Ruth and Chess had nothing to show for their time.

"Beats the Dutch," Chess declared thoughtfully. "When Tom vanished, he certainly made a good job of it!"

"I guess my idea wasn't a very good one," Ruth said despondently. "Shall we try just one more farmhouse and then go home?"

"Might as well. I'm afraid we aren't getting very far this way. The idea was all right, but it doesn't seem to work out."

Chess stopped the car by the picket fence at the side of the road. Together they walked across the lawn to the house. They knocked several times, but there was no response.

"Here comes a man from the barn," Ruth said. "I'll ask him if he saw the car, although I know it's just a waste of breath."

The farmer came up to the two young people, and Ruth greeted him pleasantly.

"We're trying to secure information concerning a blue roadster," she began.

"You mean that blue car that the bank robbers escaped in?"

"Yes." Ruth was thankful that she did not need to explain the story of the theft for the fiftieth time that day. "Have you seen such a car?"

The farmer shook his head. Chess started to turn away. It seemed useless to question the man further.

"I haven't seen a blue roadster," the farmer repeated. "But say! Come to think about it, I do know something that might interest you!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE FARMER'S STORY

"It's a strange story, and I'm not certain yet I wasn't dreaming. Some funny things happened around here the night the Cheslow bank was broken into!"

As the farmer gave this encouraging information, Chess, who had half turned to go back to the waiting car, quickly wheeled and faced the man. Ruth edged closer.

"If you know anything about Tom Cameron, please tell us!" Ruth pleaded eagerly.

"I haven't set eyes on that blue roadster you spoke about, Miss," the farmer repeated. "But I did hear some strange noises."

"Strange noises? What kind? Shouts or screams?"

"No, Miss. It sounded something like an automobile. I wouldn't have thought anything about it, if the noise had come from the road."

"Where did it come from?" Chess demanded curiously.

"I couldn't make out for certain, but I thought it come from the direction of that ravine over yonder."

Ruth and Chess looked to where the farmer pointed, but saw only a smooth stretch of field.

"You can't see the ravine from here," the farmer explained. "Anyway, there's nothing to see. Nobody but a fool would be driving a car out there. It's dangerous."

"What time was it that you heard the noise?" Ruth questioned.

"I can't say exactly. I reckon it was around two o'clock or thereabouts. I was asleep and the noise woke me up. I got up and went to the window and looked out. I saw some light flashing around over there in that field."

"What sort of a light?" Chess cried eagerly.

"At first I thought they were automobile lights, but suddenly they went out! Then I saw a smaller light that might have been from a flashlight."

"I believe we're on the right track," Ruth said in an undertone to Chess. "It's just as I was afraid—there's been some dirty work."

"Then I heard some more noise," the farmer continued. "I can't describe it. A sort of a scraping and a crash combined."

"You didn't investigate the ravine in the morning?"

"No, Miss, I didn't. I looked over across the field in the morning and didn't see a trace of anything. I told my wife about it and she laughed at me."

"How far is it from here?" Chess questioned.

"About half a mile across the field, I reckon."

"Can you get there in an automobile?"

"Go down this main road about half a mile," the farmer directed. "You'll come to a big oak tree on the left-hand side of the road. You'll see a gate opening into the field. There's a sign posted that says 'no trespassing,' but it's my field, and you can go on in. Drive straight ahead for about a quarter of a mile, and you'll come to the ravine."

"We'll find the place all right," and Chess thanked him politely.

"Have you heard anything new about the bank robbery? The paper hasn't come yet this week, and we don't hear much news out our way."

"There don't seem to be any new clews," Ruth informed the farmer. "We're hoping now that we've run down something."

"It's funny I didn't think of the robbery in connection with the noise I heard over by the ravine. I'd ride over with you, but I've got to swill the hogs."

"We'll find the place all right," Ruth hastened to say. "Thank you for helping us."

The farmer walked with them to the gate, and Chess and Ruth climbed into the roadster.

"Don't forget to shut the gate," he called after them, as Chess threw in the clutch. "I've got stock in that field."

"I'm glad he didn't decide to come with us," Chess said in relief, as soon as the car was well down the road. "We may find out something that we'd rather keep to ourselves."

"That's what I thought, too! I know Tom is innocent, but evidence seems to pile up against him so! I tell you, Chess, I can't help thinking some one deliberately framed him."

"Looks that way, Ruth. But who would do a trick like that? Tom probably has more friends around Cheslow than any other young fellow."

"Yes, and then see how quickly people are willing to believe the worst about him!"

"Well, his real friends are sticking, Ruth. I guess a fellow couldn't have a more true-blue pal than you."

"That's nice of you, Chess," and Ruth smiled gratefully. "I'd be a pretty poor sport if I didn't believe in him. What did you think of that farmer's story?"

"Sounded like the real thing to me. Of course, he may have been mistaken, but I believe we're on the trail either of Tom or of those men that escaped with the bank money."

"At any rate, our day hasn't been wasted."

They rode along in silence for several minutes. Ruth watched the road closely for the landmarks which the farmer had mentioned.

"Slow down," she cautioned a moment later. "I see the oak tree."

Chess stopped the car and opened the gate. Ruth slid into the driver's seat and guided the roadster into the field. Chess carefully closed the gate as the farmer had requested and returned to take his place behind the wheel.

"Look!" Ruth cried. "Chess, you can see car tracks here in the grass!"

"Sure enough!"

Chess "stepped on the gas," and they went bumping along the rough field toward the ravine. A flush of excitement had crept over Ruth's face. She seemed to sense that they were near Tom.

"Cripes! What now?" Chess put on the brake and brought the roadster to a complete stop.

"What's happened?" Ruth asked, alarmed.

"Feels as though we have a flat tire. I'll get out and look."

Chess got from the seat and walked around the automobile. He kicked the rear tire in disgust.

"Soft as jelly! Guess we must have picked

up a nail or something. I'm afraid I'll have to fix it, Ruth."

The girl of the Red Mill stepped from the car and gazed at the tire with chagrin. At another time she would have accepted the delay without a protest.

Now she turned longing eyes toward the ravine, which she knew was only a short distance away. She was impatient to go on—she wanted to end the suspense.

Chess saw the expression on her face and understood her feeling for Tom.

"It'll take me fifteen minutes to change this tire, Ruth. If you want to, why don't you walk on to the ravine and see if you can discover anything? As soon as I can, I'll come along with the car."

"I am in a hurry to get there, Chess! Sure there's nothing I can do to help?"

"Not a thing."

Ruth started off across the field at a brisk walk. The hot sun beat down upon her, but she did not mind.

"I suppose I shouldn't have come on without Chess," she thought. "But he knows how I feel."

Chess, left alone, jacked up the rear axle and proceeded to change tires. As he wiped the dirt from his hands after he had finished the task,

he glanced down the road. Ruth was still in sight, and had paused, apparently at the brink of the ravine.

Suddenly he saw her step backwards as though in fright. Then she turned her face toward him and cried out frantically:

"Chess! Chess!"

The young man sprang into the roadster, changed gears with lightning-like rapidity, and as the engine picked up, rushed forward at full speed. Scarcely a minute later he was out of the car. He stumbled as he ran, but regained his balance.

"Oh, Chess!" Ruth wailed for the second time. She seemed unable to say more.

The young man reached her side. Ruth gripped his arm for support. Her frightened eyes were not upon him, but were glued upon something in the valley below.

Chess followed her gaze, and he, too, started back in horror from the edge of the precipice. At the bottom of the ravine, half-hidden by rocks and bushes, was all that remained of what had once been a blue roadster!

CHAPTER XV

STRANGE HAPPENINGS

"It's Tom's car! No question about that!" Chess brought out the words through compressed lips. He felt Ruth's hand tremble on his arm. She was deathly pale.

The unexpected sight of the wrecked roadster at the bottom of the ravine had unnerved them both. Obviously, the car had plunged headlong over the precipice, a drop of more than a hundred feet!

"Chess, I can't believe Tom is down there! I can't!" Ruth cried piteously.

For a minute after she had realized the meaning of the battered mass at the foot of the cliff, Ruth had been almost paralyzed. Usually quick in thought and action, she had found herself unable to move or to think clearly.

But only for an instant did the girl of the Red Mill lose control of herself. In France as a war nurse, in far-off places while directing pictures,

she had met trying situations. She could do it now!

She forced herself to activity. Without waiting for Chess, she started down the steep incline at reckless speed.

"Wait a minute!" Chess warned, scrambling after her. "If you fall, you'll kill yourself!"

Ruth did not listen. She slipped and crawled and stumbled over the rocks. She was intent on one thing only, and that was to reach the man she loved. She did not try to analyze her feelings, but never before had she truly known what it was to suffer. At every step, Ruth endangered her own life, but she was sure-footed, as well as careless of her own safety.

Chess caught up with her and grabbed her hand. Only then did she slacken her pace. Ruth's dress caught on the bushes and her feet dislodged small stones. Once she slipped, but Chess caught her before she fell.

At last, puffing for breath, they reached the bottom of the ravine and ran toward the roadster. The front of the car and the driver's seat were entirely hidden by rocks and bushes. Chess held Ruth back.

"You stay right here until I have a look," he commanded.

Ruth protested, but obeyed. Chess reached the automobile, and pushed the shrubs and bushes

apart. Ruth endured the suspense as long as she could, and then she, too, ran forward.

She looked over Chess's shoulder. The driver's seat was empty!

"Tom wasn't killed!" Ruth cried, fairly overcome with joy. "He wasn't in the car! He must have escaped!"

"Looks that way." Chess was puzzled. "You'll never know how I felt when I pulled those bushes away, Ruth. I fully expected to see him there—that's why I made you stay back."

Chess glanced up at the cliff, and then down at the roadster. It wasn't reasonable to believe that the car had gone off into the ravine without a driver, and yet the evidence supported that belief. A critical examination of the automobile and the immediate surroundings disclosed no body.

"It's Tom's car," the young man said aloud. "But how did it get here? That's what I want to know."

Ruth was equally puzzled. Now that her first fright was over, she diligently set about to search for possible clews. There were no blood stains either on the car or on the rocks.

"Chess, does it strike you that it must have been sent over just to get rid of it?"

"Yes, it does! It looks bad for Tom, Ruth!"

The girl of the Red Mill nodded her head soberly.

"And it won't do any good for us to keep this discovery to ourselves. In a day or two some one will come along and see the wreck."

"You're right there, Ruth."

"It's likely the real thieves used Tom's car and shot it off this cliff to escape detection."

"But it won't be easy to make the sheriff believe that. I'm afraid there's a feeling against Tom already, and this won't help matters."

"I know! And it isn't fair! I'm determined to go to the bottom of this affair if it takes all summer. I must find Tom!"

"You can count on me to help you, Ruth. Tom's always been my friend—and it's the least I can do for Helen."

"Let's go back to the farmhouse right away. I want to ask that man a few more questions."

The task of climbing the steep slope to the cliff was a difficult one. Chess found a path not far from the place where they had made their rapid descent. But even though they followed the beaten track, they were forced to pause a number of times to catch their breath.

"This beats climbing the Alps," Chess puffed.

At last they reached the top, and, after an instant's rest, continued to the spot where Chess had left his roadster.

"I wonder it's here," Chess remarked. "So many strange things have happened these last few days, I'm getting like your Uncle Jabez—I expect the worst."

They drove the car through the field to the gate and down the main-traveled road. Presently they reached the farmhouse, and after some delay Chess found the farmer at the barn and brought him to the automobile where Ruth waited.

"You don't say?" the farmer exclaimed as soon as Chess had told him of their discovery. "I might have gone up there myself, but I never thought much of it."

"I wanted to ask you about those strange noises you heard," Ruth began. "You're certain they were made by an automobile engine?"

"No, Miss, I'm not sure. I said maybe they were. Come to think about it, the noise was too loud for that."

"I doubt if one could hear an automobile engine this far away from the ravine, even on a still night."

"Well, it beats me. I don't know what it was I heard, but I heard something."

Satisfied that she had learned all that the farmer knew concerning the mystery, Ruth again thanked the man. Chess started the car.

"Where to now, Ruth?"

"If you don't mind, I want to go back to that field."

"Sure thing. I have the whole day to kill, and I'm as anxious as you are to find out what dirty work has been going on."

"I have a theory—" Ruth said slowly, as though thinking to herself.

"Let's have it, Ruth. I admit I can't think of any explanation."

"Well, first I want to examine the ground around the cliff more carefully and find out if there are tracks other than those made by Tom's roadster."

"Another automobile?"

"Well, perhaps."

"If Tom didn't go over the bank with the car, where did he go? It looks as if he vanished into thin air."

"Maybe he did."

"Did what?"

"Vanish into the air."

Chess took his eye from the wheel and looked at Ruth in astonishment. He thought the girl of the Red Mill was joking, but her face was serious. However, a satisfied little smile played over her lips.

"What do you mean, Ruth? Tom's no magician."

"I know that." The last vestige of a smile

left the girl's face. "I wasn't trying to be funny. I'm dreadfully worried about Tom. And this theory of mine, while it may explain his disappearance, won't tell me where he is, and after all that's the only thing that matters."

"We'll find him, Ruth! We've been up against tough propositions before. Getting your stolen scenario out of the hands of that scamp, Dean Hollister, for instance."

"But this is different, Chess. I'll tell you frankly, I'm scared! Even if Tom didn't go off the cliff in the roadster, I'm convinced something dreadful has happened to him!"

"Cheer up, Ruth," Chess tried to comfort her. His own face did not express optimism.

They reached the field and again drove through the gate. At Ruth's suggestion, they left the roadster by the fence and started on foot across the cliff, following the tracks made by Tom's automobile.

"I don't believe there's anything new to discover," Chess declared. "What do you say we go home and tell Helen what we've found out? She'll be wondering what's happened to us."

"Not yet, Chess. I'm looking for something. Ah!"

Chess glanced up quickly as Ruth gave the cry of surprise. He hurried to her side.

"What is it? What have you found?"

Ruth pointed silently.

"Tracks?"

"Just what I was looking for. Does it strike you there's anything peculiar about those tracks?"

"Why, they're automobile tracks," Chess stated, as he studied the ground intently. Then he looked puzzled. "No, they aren't, either!"

"Let's follow them," Ruth suggested.

They had gone less than a dozen rods when Chess, who was slightly in the lead, stopped short in amazement.

"This is the end!" he announced. "The tracks run right up to this spot and suddenly break off!"

Ruth bent over the ground to see for herself. Then she straightened and unconsciously her eyes swept the sky.

"What do you make of it, Ruth?"

"It's just as I thought, Chess! I believe I understand those strange noises the farmer heard! Those tracks were made by the wheels of an airplane!"

CHAPTER XVI

RUTH SENDS FOR HELP

"An airplane!" Chess Copley ejaculated. He glanced again at the tire tracks and then at Ruth Fielding. "I believe you're right!"

"This field would make an excellent landing place."

"Unless one were afraid of dropping into the ravine on the hop-off."

"A skillful aviator would have no trouble. Everything points to the belief that on the night the bank was broken into an airplane landed in this field."

"The farmer mentioned hearing strange noises that were something like those made from an automobile motor," Chess said thoughtfully. "He probably heard the powerful engine of the plane just as it took off."

"That's exactly what I think, Chess."

"But do you believe Tom rode off in the plane? He's been in one several times but he never handled one in his life, that I know of."

"It puzzles me, Chess. We've made an important discovery, but just what it will lead to, I don't know!"

"You believe Tom flew off in the plane?"

"Perhaps as a passenger."

"Willingly?"

"No, Chess. I can't believe that!"

"To my knowledge, Tom never handled an airplane in his life. Always was rather fascinated by the idea, though. I remember he once said he'd like to take up flying."

"He's been up a number of times—in France, you know. The altitude wouldn't bother him."

Chess nodded. He recalled that Tom Cameron, as a captain in the United States Expeditionary Forces, had served in France during the World War. The young man had distinguished himself in a number of ways, and had experienced daring adventures in a plane, though as a passenger.

"Who do you figure would run the machine for him, Ruth?"

"I haven't thought it out that far yet. After all, Tom may never have seen this airplane. It's only a theory."

"Of course it's possible this field is on a regular air-mail route. In that case, a government plane may have been forced down because of engine trouble or something."

"Let's go back to Cheslow and consult the authorities," Ruth suggested, looking at her wrist watch. "I'd like to find out about the air-mail routes, because it has an important bearing on our theory. Anyway, it's late. We've discovered enough for one day."

"Suits me," Chess returned, and together they walked to the roadster.

Ruth was disturbed. She wanted to return to the Red Mill, where she could think matters through to a logical conclusion. Now everything seemed in a hopeless tangle. Never before had she been in such a maze. The evidence was discouraging. Yet there must be an explanation for Tom's disappearance in the airplane, she told herself. Why was it that every discovery she unearthed only seemed to involve him deeper?

As the roadster glided smoothly along the road to Cheslow, Ruth glanced at Chess. Since they had left the field, he had remained silent. His face was sober.

"I wonder if he can be losing faith in Tom?" Ruth asked herself. "He hasn't said a word to make me think so, but Chess is loyal. Even if he believed Tom were guilty, he wouldn't let Helen or me know."

They drove into Cheslow.

"Where to, Ruth? Sheriff's office?"

"I suppose so."

Ruth and Chess were regarded with no little curiosity as they got out of the roadster, for it had been rumored about the town that the two were engaging in an investigation of their own.

"Heard anything new on the bank robbery?" one of the loungers questioned Chess.

"Guess they haven't found the men yet," Chess replied evasively.

He did not care to take every one into his confidence. Obviously, it was his duty to report the important discovery to the officials, but the young man did not wish to stir up additional speculation concerning the blue roadster.

With Ruth he passed into the sheriff's office. As they entered the inner room, Si Perkins hastily swung his feet from the top of a highly polished desk, and with an air of importance arose to meet them.

"Well, Miss Fielding, sit down. I reckon you want to find out what luck we've had running down those men. No new developments, I'm sorry to say. It's a queer case. We've searched every road, but nary a trace of them. I haven't given up yet, though."

Ruth suppressed a smile.

Quickly, with the help of Chess, she explained the latest finding. The sheriff listened to the story, his face expressing his astonishment.

"Shoo, you don't say? I went right past that

field yesterday. I'll get right out there in my car and see if I can find a trace of the men."

"I'm afraid you won't find them," Chess said dryly. "They're a good many miles away by this time."

"By the way, do you know whether that field is on a regular mail air-route?" Ruth asked.

"The government planes don't fly within thirty miles of here. If there was an airplane out there, I reckon it was the one them scoundrels used to make their get-away in."

"It won't be easy to trail them," Ruth mused, half to herself. "They're probably miles away by this time."

"Well, I reckon if we find that Tom Cameron, we'll have the ringleader," the sheriff said shortly.

Ruth squared her shoulders and faced the sheriff.

"You're mistaken, Mr. Perkins. If I believed Tom Cameron guilty of the crime, I certainly never would have told you of our discovery of the blue car in the ravine. I believe he has been carried away against his will! And what's more, I intend to prove it!"

"I didn't mean to say your friend robbed the bank," Si Perkins apologized. "But I've got to do my duty as I see it. Folks are saying it was him that done it, and the evidence points that

way. I always liked that young feller, but I can't let friendship stand in my way."

Ruth turned abruptly. She knew that if she remained longer she would lose her temper.

"No use trying to reason with Si," Chess declared as soon as they were outside. "He always has one eye on the voters, and he swings the way the crowd goes. If he ever had a thought of his own, it would overtax his brain!"

Ruth mustered a half-hearted smile.

"I'm dead tired, Chess. Didn't sleep very well last night. If you'll drop me off at the Red Mill, I'll appreciate it."

"Surest thing. I guess I'll just run over to Cameron Hall a minute and see Helen. She'll want to know how we came out this afternoon."

"I wish you would, Chess. I'll drive my own car over after supper. Perhaps she'll want me to stay with her again to-night. Mr. Cameron is still very weak."

"You can't work night and day both," Chess warned. "Better take it easy."

"I can't, not until I know Tom's safe," Ruth said, as she left him at the roadside and walked slowly up the path to the farmhouse.

Supper was waiting for her, and Ruth forced herself to eat, although she had no appetite for food. She went through the necessary movements almost mechanically, for her mind was on

the problem which troubled her. Aunt Alvirah watched her anxiously, but made no comment.

Ruth recalled the events of the day. She was firmly convinced that Tom had been carried away in the airplane. For what purpose, she could not imagine. Certainly not for a ransom.

"I don't see how it's possible to trace that airplane," she thought despondently. "If only I could think of a way!"

"You look tired," Aunt Alvirah sympathized. "Don't worry about the money. If it's gone, it's gone."

After her first bitter disappointment, Aunt Alvirah had accepted the loss of her three hundred dollars without complaint. Ruth gave the old lady an affectionate embrace.

"You're a dear little fatalist," she said. "I'm not worrying about my forty thousand dollars —that is, not much. I'm afraid I'll be forced to close down my studio for a time, but there are more important considerations than money and business."

"I s'pose you mean that Cameron feller," Uncle Jabez broke in. "Niece Ruth, you're plumb crazy if you worry about him."

"Then I'm crazy!" Ruth replied shortly.

She pushed back her chair and left the table. She started to walk across the room, then suddenly paused midway between the dining room

and the kitchen. An expression of hope and determination came into her eyes and her entire face lighted up. She wheeled and faced Uncle Jabez and Aunt Alvirah.

"I've got it!" she cried.

"You act like you was havin' a fit!" Uncle Jabez brought out crossly.

"What is it, Ruth?" Aunt Alvirah asked gently.

Ruth had not heard the harsh comment of her uncle. She turned shining eyes upon Aunt Alvirah.

"An idea just struck me! I know the very man who can help me, if any one can!"

"Help you to git back the money?" Aunt Alvirah demanded, her eyes brightening.

"No! To find Tom for me! Perhaps the money, too! Out in California, I used an aviator in one of my pictures. His name is Jack Markham, and he has the skill and the daring to put over this job for me! I must dash to town and send him a telegram. Even now I may be too late to reach him!"

CHAPTER XVII

OUT OF THE SKY

"It was three days ago I sent the telegram, and I haven't heard a word!"

Ruth Fielding addressed Helen and Chess, who were seated beside her on the porch swing at Cameron Hall. The girl of the Red Mill had lost weight and color, and the worried look never left her eyes.

"I'm so discouraged and blue," Helen sighed. "I can't keep the news from father much longer. I've tried to make excuses for Tom's absence, but now father is stronger and able to bear it, I must tell him. I—I'm almost afraid—we'll never see Tom again."

"Don't say that, Helen!" Chess slipped his arm about her.

Under the care of the old nurse, Mr. Cameron had steadily improved. Dr. Davison had pronounced him out of danger. But the passing days had brought no news of Tom, and this had

greatly increased the anxiety of Ruth and her friends.

Ruth had dispatched a telegram to Jack Markham, the young aviator who had aided her at her studio in Hollywood, but she had received no reply.

"It's funny Markham didn't answer your telegram," Chess took up the conversation. "Perhaps he didn't get it. He may have left Hollywood."

"That's possible, although I asked to be notified in case the telegram wasn't delivered. Almost the last thing Jack Markham said to me when I left the studio was that he was eager for another job."

"Are you certain he understood your message?"

Ruth searched her pocket and brought out a crumpled sheet of paper.

"I kept a copy. You can read it."

Chess glanced at the telegram. It was brief, and read:

"Have another job for you. If available and willing to take risk, come to Cheslow with plane. Reply."

"It seems clear enough."

"Of course I didn't explain everything. I

don't want every one around here to know what I'm up to."

"In just what way did you plan to use Markham?" Helen questioned.

"He's the most daring aviator I ever knew. I wanted him to hunt for Tom. Chess and I have gone out every day in the car, but it's clear we'll never find him. Markham is an aviator with a remarkable record. He's almost uncanny. If any one can locate Tom, he can."

"He wouldn't be afraid to tackle the job?"

"Not Markham, Chess. He glories in risk."

The conversation lagged. Presently, Helen, who never left her father alone for any great length of time, returned to the sick-room, leaving Ruth and Chess on the porch.

Ruth was realizing, as never before, exactly how she felt toward Tom Cameron. She had always known that she loved him, but her love had not been the most vital thing in her life. Repeatedly, Tom had begged her to set the wedding date, but Ruth had been loath to let anything come ahead of her work.

"Some day," she had promised him. With the passing years, the term had become even more indefinite and far away.

"And now, perhaps I'll never see him again!" Ruth thought. She felt the tears coming and reached into her pocket for a handkerchief.

Chess, who stole a quick glance at her, sprang to his feet with something like his old enthusiasm and grabbed her by the hand.

"Come on, Ruth! You need exercise. You've worried too much lately. Come on and chase me down to the gate and back!"

Ruth smiled bravely and thrust the handkerchief back into her pocket.

"What do you think you are, little boy?" She tried to say it lightly, but choked.

She came slowly down the steps, but showed no inclination toward obeying Chess's suggestion.

"Never mind, Chess. Don't rack your brain for any more youthful diversions. I'm through weeping, anyway."

"Really, Ruth, you know I didn't mean it that way. If other girls didn't weep any more than you and Helen do, I'd feel alarm for the human race. I think——"

He broke off without finishing the sentence, as Ruth held up her hand for silence.

"What is it, Ruth?"

"Listen to that noise, Chess. Do you hear it?"

Chess listened intently.

"Believe I do, Ruth! It's a whirring noise. Sounds like an airplane!"

The two scanned the sky eagerly for a glimpse of a plane.

"I can't see it."

"There it is!" Ruth exclaimed. "Off to the west. A faint speck in the sky. Looks almost like a bird."

"I see it now!" Chess cried excitedly. "Say, I'm going to call Helen!"

He took the porch steps at one jump and hurried inside the house. Almost immediately he reappeared with Helen. They hurried over to Ruth, who stood on the lawn shading her eyes from the sun that she might better watch the maneuvering of the airplane.

"Could it be Tom?" Helen demanded tensely. "Or those men that robbed the bank?"

"I doubt the last," Ruth replied. "Those men wouldn't dare come back to Cheslow."

"The plane is so far away you can't tell how many are in it," Chess complained.

"I'll get father's fieldglass," Helen announced, and hurried back into the house.

In a moment she returned with the glass and hastily adjusted it. She held it to her eyes and directed it toward the airplane which was now not far away.

"There's only one man in the plane," she announced in a flat voice. "I don't recognize him. But it isn't Tom."

"The plane is coming lower," Chess observed. "Acts as though it were going to land."

"Can you see a bright blue star on the fuselage?" Ruth questioned.

"The sun's right against my eyes. I can't see. Yes, there is, Ruth! There's a big blue star on the side!"

"Then it's Jack Markham!"

"He just hopped into his plane and came on without wiring you," Chess marveled.

As the three friends watched, the plane slowly circled the town. Ruth and Helen waved their handkerchiefs.

"Did he see us, Ruth?"

"I don't know." There was a worried frown on Ruth's face. "He's looking for a safe landing place, and there aren't many around here."

The airplane circled the town for the second time, and then gradually came closer to the ground.

"He's coming down!" Chess cried. "He's headed for your uncle's big field right near the Red Mill, Ruth!"

"Couldn't have picked a safer spot," Ruth returned. "Won't Uncle Jabez be surprised when he sees an airplane swoop down almost on his head?"

"Strikes me every one in this town will be surprised," Chess grinned.

"I never thought of that!" A startled look came into Ruth's eyes. "Do you know, the peo-

ple at Cheslow are apt to think that's the plane the bank robbers escaped in and go out to arrest them! We've got to get there quick—before the sheriff and his deputies arrive!"

"You're right!" Chess agreed quickly. "Si Perkins wouldn't have any better sense than to take Markham for a bandit."

"Hurry," Ruth urged. "We can all pile into my roadster and drive down there before the crowd arrives."

"I haven't been away from the house for two weeks," Helen began.

"Della will look after your father," Chess assured her. "Come on!"

Helen gave in. The three ran across the lawn and to the driveway where Ruth had left her car. They climbed in, and Ruth took the wheel.

A moment later they were speeding down the road at as fast a rate as Ruth dared travel. Chess leaned far out the side of the car and kept his eye on the plane.

"She's dropped into the field," he announced. "If I'm not mistaken, he landed near the Red Mill."

"Better draw in your neck, or you'll be killed when we go over a bump," Helen giggled. She seemed more free from worry than she had been

since the day she had learned of her father's illness.

Chess slumped back into the seat and gave Helen a little squeeze.

"Ruth, you'll be the talk of the town," Helen said, pinching Chess in return for the pressure on her waist. "Imagine having a man sail into town to see you!"

"I only hope he landed safely," and Ruth smiled back, though she did not enter entirely into the spirit of the adventure. "It's a pretty risky business to drop down into a field you never saw before."

"That's what they say about flying," Chess joked. "It's safe enough while you're up, but it's the coming down that annoys you. Especially if you come down all in a heap."

"What is this Jack Markham like?" Helen asked seriously. "I saw him around the lot out at Hollywood, but never paid much attention to him."

"I can't describe him. He's the quiet sort. Not very good looking. Never photographed well."

"That's lucky," Chess brought out. "If he were a handsome duck, Helen might ditch me!"

"You know better," Helen corrected soberly. "But if this aviator finds Tom for me, I'll be eternally grateful."

At the mention of Tom's name, the bantering ceased instantly. As they approached the Red Mill, Chess kept on the lookout for the plane. From a distance it had been impossible for him to determine the exact spot where Markham had landed.

"I see him!" he cried. "We're not the first on the scene. Jabez Potter is hoofing it over from the Red Mill."

Ruth stopped the roadster at the side of the road near the field where Jack Markham had landed. Two other cars were parked close by.

The girl observed her uncle as he ran across the field toward the plane, and her quick eye took in three other men who were also headed for the spot.

She jerked open the car door and was upon the ground before Chess and Helen had recovered from surprise.

"Hurry!" she directed. "Si Perkins beat us here! For once in his life, that lazy sheriff moved too fast!"

CHAPTER XVIII

MARKHAM INVESTIGATES

"It's Jack Markham all right! And sure enough, if old Si Perkins isn't after him!"

Chess chuckled, as he anticipated the sheriff's discomfiture when he learned the identity of the strange aviator. He helped Ruth and Helen under the barbed-wire fence which separated the road from the field, and an instant later they were hurrying toward the airplane.

As Ruth and her friends reached the scene, three men who had gathered about the aviator stepped back to make room for the newcomers. Save for Jabez Potter, who was still puffing after his race from the Red Mill, there was no one else at the field.

"I reckon we've got our man," Si Perkins announced proudly, directing himself to Ruth. "I seen his plane when he first circled around town, and I jumped right in my car and followed him down."

Chess grinned openly, and Ruth had difficulty in maintaining a serious face.

Jack Markham, the aviator, had climbed down from the cockpit. As he caught sight of Ruth, the bewildered expression left him and he turned to her in relief.

"This man is trying to arrest me, Miss Fielding. I don't know what for."

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake," Ruth told the sheriff clearly. "This aviator is a friend of mine from California. I sent for him to help us trace the bank robbers."

"Shoo, you don't say?" Si was somewhat taken back. He cast a last suspicious glance at the young aviator. "Well, I reckon it's all right, if you say so, Miss Fielding," and a few minutes later he withdrew, as did the others who had come up with him.

"Let's get away from here before a crowd gathers," Ruth suggested to Markham. "I want to have a quiet talk with you."

Ruth led the way back to the car, and with difficulty they all found seats.

"I suppose I should have telegraphed," Markham apologized. "But I figured a wire wouldn't reach you much quicker than I could get here myself. So I just hopped in my plane and headed right for Cheslow."

"I was worried," Ruth admitted. "I thought perhaps you didn't get my telegram."

"I got it just in time. I was planning to start off on a trip to Seattle. But I'd much rather work for you."

"You may change your mind when you learn what it is I want you to do. This has no connection with the picture business, and it's risky."

"That's the sort of job I like."

"All right," Ruth replied, and proceeded to relate the events which had occurred at Cheslow.

"Just exactly what is it you want me to do?" Markham asked, when she had finished the story.

"I want you to take your plane and make trips through the country, keeping a sharp lookout for Tom Cameron and that airplane that apparently landed in the field near the ravine."

"I'll start the first thing in the morning," Markham promised. "I've been driving all day, and I'm pretty tired now. If you'll direct me to the hotel, I think I'll rest and freshen up."

"Why not bunk with me?" Chess asked impulsively. He had taken a strong liking to the young aviator. "It will be more convenient than the hotel."

"Thank you. That's very kind of you," Markham said gratefully.

Chess dropped Ruth at the Red Mill upon

her request, and after taking Helen back to Cameron Hall drove into Cheslow with the aviator.

"What in the world is goin' on, my pretty?" Aunt Alvirah inquired anxiously as Ruth entered the farmhouse. "Has Tom come back?"

"No, Aunt Alvirah, not yet. But, somehow, I have a feeling that we'll soon find him."

"So much has been goin' on here lately," Aunt Alvirah sighed. "First it's Mr. Cameron, then the bank, then Tom, and now an airship lands right at the back door!"

"How would you like to see your Ruth flying over the Red Mill?"

"Mercy on me! You ain't thinkin' of goin' up in that airship, are you, Ruth?" The little old lady half arose from her chair. "Oh, my back! And, oh, my bones!"

"Don't be alarmed, Aunt Alvirah. I won't fly with Markham unless he needs me. But if he does—well, it's the least I can do to help find Tom."

The door opened and Jabez Potter came in. He dropped hammer and nails on the kitchen table.

"I put up a sign 'No Trespassing,'" he informed them tersely. "I guess I fixed them fellers that was hangin' around that plane. If I catch any one tramping down my grass, I'll sic Si Perkins onto 'em."

"Well done," Ruth observed.

Jabez Potter walked to the sink and filled the wash basin. This was the first day since the loss of his money that he had been in a state remotely approaching good humor.

"I don't figger you done no good, bringin' that aviator here from California," he announced, as he wiped his face vigorously with the coarse roller towel. "The money's gone, and Tom Cameron's skipped the country."

"Uncle Jabez! You don't believe Tom took that money?"

"I can't figger it out no other way," Jabez spoke thoughtfully rather than harshly. "He was a slick feller I reckon and sort of took you in, Ruth."

"Took me in!" Ruth stormed. "I've known him almost all my life!"

"You can't always tell, Niece Ruth. Tom was brung up with a silver spoon in his mouth."

Sick at heart, Ruth went to her own room. Even Uncle Jabez had turned against Tom!

She walked to the window and looked out over the smooth stretch of field where Markham's airplane stood.

"It's my only hope. My only hope," she repeated over and over to herself.

The next morning, bright and early, Chess and Markham and Helen and Ruth were on hand ready to start the search for Tom Cameron.

The engine was started and Markham climbed into the cockpit.

"Good luck!" Chess shouted above the roar of the motor.

Markham was off. Slowly the plane scooted over the field, then faster and faster it went until it gathered enough speed and gradually lifted from the ground.

All that day Ruth and her friends waited in an agony of suspense. Chess and Helen spent a great part of their spare time at the Red Mill, and the three watched the sky for the return of the birdman.

Not until nearly nightfall did Markham return. He was tired and discouraged.

"Nothing to report, Miss Fielding," he stated regretfully. "I kept the air all day, but I didn't sight a thing that had any bearing on the mystery."

"Well, we won't give up, Markham. We'll keep on hunting for a few days more, at least. If you need my help, I'll fly with you. I've been up before as a passenger. I'm not afraid."

"There isn't any need of it yet, Miss Fielding. Not unless I discover something important."

The following days brought only additional discouragement to Ruth and her friends. Although Jack Markham explored the country in

all directions, he sighted nothing worthy of report.

"I'm afraid the plane we seek isn't in the country," he stated after the fourth day of the search.

"Let's try one day more," Ruth pleaded. "If you don't find any trace of Tom then, I suppose we may as well give it up—for the time being. I'll never entirely give up until I find him."

"I'll do my best, Miss Fielding."

Markham was off soon after dawn. Ruth watched him take off. All that day she moved restlessly about the farmhouse, attending to a few simple duties. She could not find enough work to keep her mind from her trouble. She telephoned to Cameron Hall once or twice, but, as she was not needed there, did not go up.

At noon, Jabez Potter brought her a letter that the postman had delivered. She read it without much emotion. The letter concerned the finances of the Fielding Film Company. There were expenses to be met, and without her forty thousand dollars or Tom to help her, she had no means of raising the money quickly. Ruth folded the letter and put it away in her desk. The problems of her moving picture business seemed of little consequence now.

"Was it more bad news?" Aunt Alvirah asked timidly.

"I need money," Ruth returned, rather indif-

ferently. "I can't keep my studio open. I'll close it down in a week or two. Later on, money will come in from some of my recent pictures."

"Can't you borrow the money?" Jabez demanded.

"I suppose I could. I—I hadn't thought much about it. Tom has looked after that end lately and I've put it out of my mind. Anyway, I couldn't go on with another picture just at this time! I haven't even written a word on the scenario I'd planned to write while I was at home."

In all her life, Ruth had never been so depressed. Often when she had been separated from Tom for a short time, she had missed him, but never before had she known the pain of a real separation. Gradually, during this heartbreaking time of silence, a fear had taken possession of her—a fear that she was unwilling to express even to herself. Would she ever see Tom again?

The day dragged slowly on. Ruth walked listlessly from one part of the house to the other and occasionally she would go out of doors and scan the sky hopefully. Helen and Chess arrived at the Red Mill in the latter's roadster late in the afternoon.

"Markham isn't back yet, is he?" Chess asked.

"Not yet. Sit down on the grass and let's watch for him."

Fifteen minutes slipped by, then a half hour. Suddenly Chess sprang to his feet and pointed to the sky. A black speck was faintly visible.

"It's the plane!" he cried.

Helen and Ruth scrambled to their feet and watched Markham's approach with interest. As the plane slowly circled in preparation for the downward swoop, Helen, Ruth and Chess walked to the landing field and waited eagerly.

Without a jolt, Markham brought the airplane to earth. Ruth and her friends kept at a distance until the plane had stopped, and then ran toward Markham.

The aviator extricated himself from the cockpit and jumped to the ground.

"Any news?" Chess called out before Markham had time to make his usual report.

"Yes, I do have news this time!" came the unexpected reply.

"You've located Tom?" Ruth demanded in an excited voice.

"No, Miss Fielding, I didn't see anything of Mr. Cameron. But I've had adventures enough for one day and I've discovered something that I consider important!"

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT MARKHAM SAW

"I KEPT to the air all day," Jack Markham began his story. "I admit I was pretty tired and discouraged. A heavy wind blew head-on most of the time, and I had trouble holding my plane steady."

The aviator spoke calmly, yet he could not entirely hide his excitement. Ruth, Chess and Helen stepped closer and listened intently.

"I kept a lookout for a field where a plane such as we are hunting for might land. There aren't many good fields around Cheslow that are smooth enough. Well, I was almost ready to give up the search and come back here when I passed a field that attracted my attention."

"Where was that?" Ruth asked.

"About twenty miles from here, almost straight east. I don't know why the field interested me, because it certainly wasn't one that a sane aviator would choose as a landing place. More properly speaking, it interested me only because all rea-

sonable landing places had yielded no clew to the mystery. This field was small and rough, and not very far away there was dense timber."

Ruth smiled hopefully, but did not interrupt the story.

"Then I noticed some object on the ground. At first I couldn't make out what it was. I thought it looked like the rudder of an airplane."

"An airplane rudder!" Helen exclaimed.

"Yes, it struck me that some plane either in making a deliberate or a forced landing had been badly damaged."

"Was it a rudder?" Chess tried to hurry the story along.

"I'm getting to that. I decided to attempt a landing, even at the risk of a crash."

"You're too daring," Ruth chided him gently.

"Well, I landed safely enough. Have made it in worse spots. I didn't stop my engine, because it's no easy trick to get it started again. Without leaving my machine, I saw that the object was a broken airplane rudder!"

"Did you see any sign of the airplane?" Ruth questioned.

"No, Miss Fielding. However, it would have been an easy matter to have wheeled the plane into the bushes out of sight. I was just getting out of my ship to investigate more closely when

I was startled to see three men coming toward me."

"Three men!" Helen cried eagerly. "Was Tom one of them?"

"I'm not quite certain I would recognize Mr. Cameron at a distance. Still, I feel reasonably sure he wasn't with these men."

"Can you describe them?" Ruth asked.

"Not very accurately, though I'm sure I could identify them if I ever saw them again. They looked like toughs to me. Almost before I knew it, they were down on me. Apparently, they had been hiding among the trees. One of the rascals had a shotgun. About the time he aimed it at me, I decided it was time to move on."

"He didn't shoot at you, did he?" Helen cried excitedly. "I'll bet those men know something about my brother's strange disappearance!"

"I didn't wait to see whether he was a good marksman or not," the aviator smiled. "I shot across the field as fast as I could make her go. Even then I barely got up enough momentum to lift the plane in the limited space. I fully expected to crash into a tree, but the bus raised just in time.

"I circled another time around the field, taking care to keep out of range. I'm certain I saw a hut just at the edge of the wood. That's all there

is to my story. I came back here as fast as I could to report."

"Do you believe those men had a hand in the bank robbery?" Ruth demanded quickly.

"Yes, I do, Miss Fielding. Otherwise, why should they have attempted to shoot me before they even knew who I was? The broken rudder —everything—points to that belief."

"You've made an important discovery!" Ruth exclaimed. "It will take quick action, but I believe we can capture those thieves and perhaps find Tom! From what you've told me, I feel certain you've located the gang that broke into the bank!"

"That broken rudder probably prevented them from getting farther away from Cheslow." Helen offered this suggestion. "If we can just surround them!"

"First of all, we must notify the authorities," Ruth announced firmly. "We can't do a thing or make an arrest unless we're backed up by the law."

"Like as not there are more than three in the gang, too," Markham added. "In that case, they'd pepper us full of shot before we had a chance."

"What is your advice?" Ruth asked. "Shall we go in your plane or by car?"

"My advice would be to go by automobile. It

would be easier to approach without detection. Of course, I'm willing to attempt another landing if you wish to go by plane."

"Will you go with us? To lead the way."

"Will I? Miss Fielding, I'm with you to the end!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" Chess shouted. "Let's get down to Cheslow, notify the sheriff, and be off! There isn't a minute to waste. We'll only lose time if we stop to telephone. Come on!"

The four ran to the road where Chess had left his roadster.

"You take Helen," Ruth directed. "Markham can ride with me. I'll have my roadster backed out of the barn in a jiffy."

Although Chess and Helen had the head start, Ruth overtook their car before Cheslow was reached. They rushed into the sheriff's office. Outside, a curious crowd gathered, for a few loungers who had noticed the excitement of Ruth and her friends quickly passed the word around that something unusual was in the wind.

"Mr. Perkins, I believe we've located your bank robbers! If you'll give us a few men, I think we can capture them!"

The sheriff was on his feet in an instant. Briefly, Ruth told him of Markham's discovery.

"We'll get 'em!" he cried. "Wait till I find

my revolver! You young fellers will want to be armed too!"

Markham and Chess nodded grimly.

"Have you an extra revolver for me?" Ruth demanded crisply. "I may need it for self-protection!"

"You aren't going, Ruth Fielding!" Helen cried.

"I am! They'll need my car!"

"You'll be killed!"

"Tom may be there and in danger! Don't try to hold me, Helen. I tell you I'm going!"

Ruth was out of the office, followed by Markham, who sprang into the roadster beside her. Chess and the sheriff were close at their heels.

"Come on, you fellows!" the sheriff shouted to the group of men standing outside the building. "We're after the bank robbers!"

Instantly, a few of the more courageous ones made a dash for near-by cars and prepared to follow in the trail of the sheriff's party. A deputy, late in arriving upon the scene, sprang upon the running board of Ruth's roadster, just as it backed from the curb. He climbed over the door and crowded in beside Markham.

"Follow our car!" the young aviator called back to the sheriff. "We'll lead the way!"

Four other automobiles fell into line. Ruth turned her car, shifted gears with skill, and was

off. She bent low over the wheel, and settled down for the arduous and dangerous ride.

She did not glance back over her shoulder, or she would have seen the dejected figure of her chum standing on the steps of the sheriff's office.

"She'll be killed!" Helen wailed.

Suddenly she straightened.

"I won't be left behind! If Ruth isn't afraid, I'm not either!"

The girl glanced hopefully about her for a means of conveyance. Her eye noted the approach of Bill Jones and his wheezing vehicle. She ran out to the edge of the walk and waved her arms for him to stop.

"Bill, they're after the bank robbers! Will you take me along?"

Without waiting for a reply, she stepped upon the running board. Bill opened the door and she slid into a seat.

"Straight ahead down Main Street!" she directed.

With a rattle and a grinding of gears they, too, were off.

CHAPTER XX

THE BATTLE

UNAWARE that her chum had overcome her momentary fear and was traveling in her wake, Ruth Fielding glued her eyes on the road. The roadster gathered speed as she drove through the streets of Cheslow.

"First turn to the right!" Jack Markham directed. "Out the Red Mill road!"

Ruth swung the roadster with ease. She reached down and switched on the lights, for it was rapidly growing dark. Jack Markham had not returned until a late hour from his search of the countryside, and the trip to Cheslow, as well as the collection of rifles, revolvers, and ammunition, had taken additional time.

Followed by the sheriff and a string of cars, Ruth led the way down the Red Mill road. As she passed her home, she cast a quick glance toward the farmhouse and wondered if Aunt Alvirah would worry about her when she was absent from the supper table.

Ruth Fielding was familiar with the roads in and about Cheslow, and did not need to be encouraged to "step on it." As she had often expressed it, "she could find every bump with her eyes closed." Her roadster was heavy and built for speed. Seldom did Ruth consent to fast driving, but this was one occasion when she placed her own safety and even that of her passengers second.

The speedometer crept up and up. If Jack Markham had experienced any misgiving when he seated himself in Ruth's car, his uneasiness was soon lost in admiration of the way the girl of the Red Mill handled the wheel.

"Sheer grit!" he told himself. "Not a nerve in her body. Not many girls could drive the way she can!"

Markham did not repeat his thoughts to Ruth, although he occasionally cast an approving glance in her direction. Save to give curt directions as to the road, he did not speak.

On through the night they went. There was no moon, and scattered clouds partially hid the stars from view.

"Looks like rain," Ruth observed briefly. "Hope we don't get caught out. This road gets pretty sticky."

An unexpected detour caused her to jerk on the brake. The near crash did not unnerve her. She

quickly backed the car and took the road indicated. Markham glanced at the speedometer.

"We've gone nearly twenty miles already," he observed. "I suspect it's nearer thirty miles to that field, with this detour."

Ruth was forced to slacken her speed. The detour was rough and rutty, and it was not easy to avoid the bumps. She drove on for some time and presently came out on the main road again. Ten minutes ride brought them to a fork in the road.

"Where to?" Ruth demanded.

For the first time Jack Markham hesitated. During the ride his ability to select the right road had been almost uncanny. Now he stood up in the car and surveyed the country in all directions. The cars which were following Ruth's roadster came up and stopped.

"That detour got me off my bearings for a minute," Markham apologized, as though he had been at fault. "I think I've got the lay of things all right now. Unless I'm mistaken, we're within half a mile of that field."

"Hadn't we beter turn off our car lights?" Ruth suggested. "If we can surprise the gang, so much the better."

"Lights off!" the sheriff ordered, and the word was passed from one car to another.

"Turn to the right," Markham directed Ruth.

Ruth drove slowly now, and the automobiles that were following kept close behind. Ruth attended to her driving, but Markham and the deputy strained their eyes for a glimpse of the field. The road took them winding through timber.

"Better stop here," Markham said quietly. "Unless I'm mistaken, the field where I found the broken rudder is just the other side of this timber."

Ruth obeyed instantly, and brought the roadster to a halt at the side of the road. One by one the other cars stopped.

"I thought it would be better for me to investigate before we drove out into the open." Markham addressed the sheriff. "I'll go out into that field and flash a light. If anything happens you can surround the men—you'll have them dead to rights."

"I reckon that's sensible," Si Perkins agreed. "Unless they show their hand, I reckon we ain't got any evidence against them that would stand in court."

"That's too dangerous!" Ruth protested.

"I'm not afraid," Markham replied. "Anyway, I doubt if they'll dare shoot me."

"But to make yourself a target——"

"If I have these men figured right, they'll be

cowards, Miss Fielding. They'll just try to scare me away."

Ruth said no more. Jack Markham was capable of taking care of himself, that she knew. Danger was life itself to the young aviator!

Markham left the group and walked boldly down the road. He made no attempt to hide himself. He climbed a fence and reached the clearing. The sheriff and his men followed to the edge of the timber and there they waited. Ruth hesitated, and then she too climbed from the car and hurried to a position where she could see the young aviator.

He had taken a flashlight from his pocket. The darkness blotted out everything except the moving light. Five minutes passed and nothing happened.

The field was enclosed on either side by timberland, and it was toward the second stretch of trees that Markham walked. Ruth watched the moving light in an agony of fear. Not far from the edge of the timber the light became stationary. There it remained for several minutes.

Suddenly a shot rang out. The light disappeared.

"Oh!" Ruth suppressed a cry of alarm.

"They winged him!" Si Perkins whispered hoarsely. "The scoundrels! Up and at 'em!"

Before the men could press forward Jack

Markham was in their midst. He was excited, but unharmed.

"Fooled them that time!" he chuckled. "Could hear them in the bushes. So I put my flashlight down on top of a stump. They shot at the light instead of me! There's an open gate right at this end of the field. We can drive in, and, if there's a battle, use the cars for protection."

There was a rush for the cars.

"Down into the bottom!" Markham ordered Ruth, sliding into the driver's seat.

Ruth obeyed reluctantly but without argument.

With a spurt of speed, the cars shot through the gate and into the field.

"Spread out, men!" Si Perkins shouted. "Surround them!"

From her position in the bottom of the car, it was impossible for Ruth to see what was happening.

"Run 'em down!" she heard the sheriff yell. "Don't let 'em get away!"

She heard a noise in the bushes and decided that the desperados, seeing they were outnumbered, had retreated into the timber.

"There's an old shack back in the woods!" Markham called out. "They're making for that! Surround the place!"

Branches and bushes struck the windshield, as

Markham pushed on into the woods, following a rough road used but seldom.

The roadster came to a sudden halt and almost instantly Markham was upon the ground.

The sheriff strode forward.

"I'm the sheriff o' this county!" he bawled at the top of his voice. "Come out here an' surrender! If you don't we'll open fire on you!"

To this there was no reply.

"Are you comin'?" demanded Si Perkins. "If you don't, we'll fire on you!"

Still there was silence.

"Nothing doing," muttered Markham.

"Well, you gave them warning," put in Chess.

"Surround the house!" Si Perkins called out in lower tones. "I'll fire one shot as the signal! Then from all directions, give the house a volley! They'll think we have the army after 'em!"

"Wait!" Chess Copley pushed forward. "Why not fire upon them from the front only? A couple of us can sneak up from behind while your fire attracts their attention, and get the drop on them!"

"I'll go with you!" Markham volunteered promptly.

The plan was agreed upon, and Chess Copley and Jack Markham disappeared among the trees. The sheriff, followed by his deputies and the other

men, crept cautiously forward toward the shack. Ruth waited anxiously in the car.

"Careful!" Chess warned Markham. "Don't make any noise or we'll have a bullet through us!"

Protected by the trees, the two young men circled the shack and crept up from the rear.

"There's a window!" Markham warned. "Don't show your face!"

A shot broke the silence.

"The signal!" Chess whispered tensely.

Almost instantly there was an answering volley of shots directed toward the shack. Then was heard the report of a rifle.

"Now!" Markham cried, and, crouching low, he and Chess hurried forward, leaving the protection of the trees.

A quick dash through the open, and they had reached the rear of the shack. The window was close to the ground. With one kick of his heavy shoe, Markham shattered the glass. Chess thrust his shoulder through the opening.

"Hands up!" he shouted, getting the drop on the men inside. There were four of them, and their backs were turned to the window.

They wheeled, but were too slow on the draw. Markham jumped through the window and quickly disarmed them. Then he threw open the front door—a signal to the sheriff.

A moment more and Si Perkins and his deputies

were inside the shack. Ruth had disregarded her orders to remain in the car, and, realizing that the battle was over, also hurried forward.

One glance around the room told her that Tom was not there. She stepped closer to study the faces of the men. They were all equally sullen and evil in appearance. Si Perkins, with the aid of his deputies, quickly handcuffed the fellows.

"I know those two!" Ruth cried, pointing. "They're from Cheslow!"

By this time Chess had found an oil lamp and had struck a match. As the light flooded the shack, the members of the sheriff's party turned off their flashlights.

"You're right, Miss Fielding," Si Perkins agreed. "I've seen these birds before. They never were any good. Well, I guess we've got our bank robbers!"

"Where's the money?" some one demanded.

The four desperados maintained a sullen silence. A search of their persons and the cabin did not reveal the missing bank notes.

Ruth had looked about the shack, too, for she hoped to find some clew that would lead to the explanation of Tom's disappearance. The excitement of the last half hour had keyed her up. She had fully expected to find Tom held a captive by the robbers.

"We'll take these rascals to town," Si Perkins

decided. "They've hid the money some place. But we'll make 'em tell!"

He marched the criminals from the shack.

"Just a minute!" Ruth called, following the sheriff from the cabin. "I want to ask them a question."

She turned to the two members of the gang who were from Cheslow. She directed her question to the younger man, Claude Hand, a garage loafer. It occurred to Ruth that she had seen him in Cheslow even after the bank robbery.

"What have you done with Tom Cameron?" she demanded sharply.

"We haven't seen your darling Tom," came the retort, accompanied by an insolent leer.

"I don't believe it!"

"Well, just find him then!"

"No use trying to get anything out of them clams," Si Perkins insisted. "We'll take 'em to town and lock 'em up. Maybe then they'll talk!"

The sheriff turned his back for an instant. Claude Hand edged closer to the girl from the Red Mill. His whispered threat was intended for her ears only.

"You get us out of this, Ruth Fielding, or you'll never see Tom Cameron again!"

CHAPTER XXI

RUTH TO THE RESCUE

RUTH FIELDING stood as one dazed while Si Perkins and the deputies marched the four handcuffed men to the waiting automobiles. As Claude Hand passed in front of Ruth, he gave her one last significant look. The glance aroused the girl to action.

"Come on, Ruth," Chess said kindly. "I'm afraid Tom isn't here after all."

The girl of the Red Mill made no move to follow the sheriff. She turned and faced Chess.

"I'm not so certain about that! Do you know what Claude Hand just whispered to me?" She repeated the warning.

"Threatened you, did he? Oh, well, he'll soon be locked up where he can't do any harm."

"Chess, I'm convinced these rascals have held Tom a captive against his will. I feel certain they have him hidden somewhere near this shack!"

"Wait a minute, Ruth," Chess said quickly. "I'll call Markham!"

The young aviator had started for the automobile, but as Chess called to him, he stopped and came back. Chess quickly told him of the threat against Ruth.

"I'm certain Tom is somewhere near," Ruth insisted.

"They didn't have him hidden in the cabin," Markham said thoughtfully.

"The search wasn't a very thorough one," Ruth replied. "The light was poor. It's possible we've overlooked an important clew."

Disregarding the sheriff and his posse, the three turned back and crossed the clearing to the deserted cabin. Markham pushed open the door and flashed his light about the room until he again saw the oil lamp. He lighted it and set it on the table.

"It's just a one-room cabin with a loft," Chess declared. "I don't believe they could have hidden Tom here."

"Maybe he's in the loft, Chess."

"I'll soon see," answered the young man, and ran up the ladder set against a side wall. He threw the rays of a flashlight around.

"Nothing up here," he announced, and a moment later came down again.

Ruth held up her hand for silence.

"What did you hear?" Markham whispered.

"I thought I heard a noise—a sort of groan. I guess I dreamed it."

Ruth picked up the lamp from the table, and flashed the light into the dark corners of the room. She glanced hopefully toward the rafters.

Discouraged that the search had revealed no trace of Tom, she set the lamp down on the table again. As she turned away, her eye was attracted by something on the floor under the table. She gave a low cry of surprise and stepped nearer.

"What is it, Ruth?" Chess cried, hurrying to her side.

"A trapdoor!"

"Where?"

Ruth pointed under the table.

Quickly Jack Markham and Chess Copley lifted the table to the other side of the room. Chess tugged at the door, and, with the young aviator's help, succeeded in raising it.

"We'll go first, Ruth!" Chess directed. "No telling what we're likely to run into down there. You stay back until we find out if it's safe."

They peered down into the cellar, but could see nothing save dirt walls. A damp, musty odor reached their nostrils.

"I don't like this job a little bit," Chess muttered, half to himself. Just what he expected to

find in the cellar he could not have told, but he too had an uneasy feeling.

A ladder led from the ground floor to the cellar. Testing it to make certain it would bear his weight, Chess stepped cautiously upon it. Jack Markham followed him, and slowly they lowered themselves into the dark cellar. Ruth picked up the lamp from the table and stood near the opening.

"Can't see anything," Chess complained. "Pass along the flashlight, Markham!"

There was a brief period of silence. Then Chess called out again.

"I guess it's all right. Doesn't seem to be anything down here. You can come on, Ruth."

"It's as damp as fury," Markham added. "Watch your step on that ladder."

Ruth placed the oil lamp on the floor and lowered herself through the opening.

"Hello!" Chess suddenly cried. "What's this?" His voice broke off sharply.

Involuntarily, Ruth paused on the ladder. Her heart beat faster.

"Tell Ruth to stay back," Chess called out. His voice was broken, scared.

"What is it, Chess?" Ruth cried. "Tell me!"

"There's the body of a man lying over here in the corner!"

"What?" Markham sprang forward.

Ruth sagged on the ladder. She felt sick, unable to go on. Chess's next hoarse whisper penetrated her very heart.

"It's Tom!"

"Tom!" came her cry of anguish.

She sprang from the ladder and ran across the cellar. The light from the lamp flickered, but did not go out. She reached Chess and Markham and dropped to her knees beside the limp body on the floor.

"He's bound and gagged!" she exclaimed. "But he's alive! He's alive!" she cried after a moment.

Chess thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out a knife. While Ruth worked at the bandage around Tom's mouth, Chess and the young aviator sawed at the rope.

"Oh, Tom!" Ruth wailed.

The figure in her arms stirred, the eyes fluttered open.

"Ruth!"

He tried to smile, but succeeded in making only a grimace. His head dropped against her shoulder.

"I'm—all—right," he faltered. "Just weak."

Ruth pressed him closer.

"Bless you—Ruth. Knew you'd come."

"Let's get him out of here quick!" Chess cut the last rope and Tom was free.

Gratefully he stretched his tired limbs.

"Been tied up—for hours. Guess I must have been unconscious."

"Don't try to talk," Ruth interposed gently.

"The air's bad down here," Markham put in. "Here, Chess, lend a hand and we'll get him upstairs."

Chess and the aviator lifted Tom to his feet.

"I can walk," Tom protested.

He took a step and would have fallen had not Chess caught him. With Markham and Chess nearly carrying him, he reached the foot of the ladder.

"Not so fast," he faltered. "There's something—can't go till we get it—the bank money!"

"The bank money!" Ruth had entirely forgotten the robbery in her fear for the safety of the man she loved.

"Where is it?" Chess demanded.

"Over on—other side of room. Under some canvas."

"Never mind the money," Ruth said firmly. "We can get that later. The first thing is to get Tom up where there's some fresh air!"

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT HAPPENED TO TOM

"I'm all right," Tom Cameron protested for the second time. "My legs are still sort of wabbly from being tied up so long, but otherwise there's nothing the matter with me."

Chess Copley and Jack Markham had helped him up the ladder from the cellar where he had been held prisoner. They had seated him near the open window of the hut. Ruth still clung tightly to his hand, as though she were afraid he would again disappear should she take her eyes from him.

"That air's good!" Tom breathed deeply. "Had most given up when you folks came. Never expected to get out of that cellar alive."

"Oh, Tom!" Ruth looked at him hard. "If anything had happened to you—I don't know what I'd have done! I was never so frightened in my life!" Impulsively she kissed him.

Tom smiled for the first time since his rescue. He turned to her with a warm light in his eyes.

Chess and Markham flashed each other significant glances.

"I guess it's time we go after that money," Chess announced dryly. "How about it, Markham?"

"Sure, I can hear the money calling us now!"

Ruth refused to be teased, but openly slipped her arm around Tom.

"Seriously, fellows," Tom insisted, "that bank money is down there in the cellar. Those——" he groped for a strong enough word. "Those fiends hid it there."

Chess dived down through the opening in the floor and Markham followed. The moment they had disappeared Tom turned to Ruth.

"Ruth, did you really mean that kiss?"

"Did I really mean it? Why, Tom, of course I did! Why do you ask such a question?"

"I—I don't know," Tom stammered. "It was different, somehow."

Before Ruth could reply, there was an interruption.

"Under the canvas, did you say?" Chess shouted from below.

"Yes!" Tom called out, but his voice was weak and hoarse. "Guess I've caught a bad cold down there in that damp cellar," he told Ruth.

"Good night! Christopher Columbus!" came the cry from the cellar.

"What's the matter now?" Ruth called down in alarm.

"I've discovered it! The money must be all here, because the cellar's just full of it, Ruth! My eye! I'll never see so much cash again in all my life. Come on down and have a look, Ruth!"

Ruth peered curiously down into the cellar, but made no move to leave Tom.

"Hurry!' she begged. "Get the money and come on. I want to rush Tom to the doctor."

Below she could still hear the excited exclamations of Chess and Markham as they estimated the amount of money they had recovered. Ruth went back to Tom at the window.

"Tom, I was never so frightened in my life," she repeated. "When I saw you there——"

Chess's head appeared in the opening in the floor.

"Beg pardon, folks, for interrupting the family reunion, but what am I going to do with this stuff now I've got it?"

Chess was in such a good humor and as he climbed up the ladder with his hands full of neat stacks of bank notes he presented such a funny picture, that both Ruth and Tom burst into laughter.

The young man deposited his load on the table and helped Jack Markham up the ladder. He too disposed of his burden.

"I guess this night's work clears you, Tom," Chess declared seriously.

"Clears me?" Tom demanded quickly. "What do you mean?"

Chess could have bitten his tongue for the break. Having made it, he decided to go on.

"Some of the smart alecks around Cheslow tried to blame you for the bank robbery."

"Blame me? How ridiculous!"

"That's what Ruth said," Chess returned. "What's more, you can thank her for proving it! Of course we all believed you were innocent, but Ruth was really the one that was responsible for running down the crooks and finding you."

"Nonsense!" Ruth cut in. "I didn't do anything more than Chess or Helen or Jack Markham did!"

"I'll thank you all—later," Tom said. "If you hadn't come when you did—well, I couldn't have stood it much longer." Abruptly he changed the subject. "Tell me about my father. I've worried about him. I'd lie there and just think—think—think."

"Your father is getting well," Ruth hastened to assure him. "He isn't able to move about yet, but he's rapidly recovering. He's worried dreadfully about you. He thinks you're away on a business trip, but lately that explanation of your disappearance has failed to satisfy him."

"He must have thought I was an ungrateful son—to leave him when he was ill!"

"Don't think about that, Tom. You'll soon be at home and can explain everything to him."

"And I have a real story to tell!"

"Better wait until we get back to Cheslow, Tom. You need medical attention now."

"I tell you I'm not keen on taking all this money back to town," Chess began, with a worried frown. "What if some one should stick us up on the way back?"

"Not much danger," Ruth laughed.

"I don't know about that," Chess replied seriously. "Those crooks might escape and come back here after it."

"You're always building up trouble," Ruth accused him.

"No, but I tell you, so many strange things have happened, you can't be too sure! Bad luck has just been stalking our trail ever since we hit Cheslow."

"Well, we're ready to go!" Ruth announced. "I've been trying to get you to hurry. If you're so afraid some one will hold you up, why not hurry to town and get the worry over with?"

Chess began stuffing the bank notes into his pockets. His good humor had left him, and now he cast an uneasy glance out of the uncurtained window. Tom saw his expression and smiled.

"Chess, you wouldn't be so fond of that money if you'd slept with it for almost a week."

"I'm not fond of it—I'm just——" His glance wandered to the window again.

"Chess, you'll make me nervous in a minute," Ruth protested. "Don't look that way! You almost make me believe you see some one outside the window."

Chess was sober.

"I didn't see any one," he said in a low voice, tense with excitement. "But I heard something!"

"You must have imagined it!" Ruth laughed nervously.

"Forget it, and let's go!" Jack Markham said quickly. "You'll have us all on edge if you keep on. The sheriff and his party left with the bank robbers more than fifteen minutes ago. There couldn't be any one outside."

"I didn't imagine it!" Chess protested, still in a low tone. "I tell you I heard a noise in the bushes!"

The others strained their ears. Even as the young man spoke, they heard the faint rustling to which he referred. Startled, they looked at one another. The same thought flashed through the mind of each. Was some one watching their movements from the bushes? Had some one seen Chess slip the bank notes into his pockets?

"Quick! Put out the light!" Tom whispered.

Instinctively, he dragged himself from the chair where he had been reclining and placed himself between Ruth and the window. His hand squeezed hers protectingly.

Markham reached for the oil lamp and blew it out. Chess thrust his hands into his pockets fearfully, as though already he felt an unfriendly hand reaching for the money.

"I can see some one out there," he hissed. "Two persons—right in front of the cabin!"

Ruth clung tightly to Tom's hand. At the risk of being shot she peeped out of the window. She, too, saw the two figures hiding in the bushes. They were slowly creeping up closer to the cabin. Chess searched for his revolver.

Suddenly Ruth held up her hand.

"Don't shoot!" she ordered. "Chess, don't dare shoot!"

"I won't unless they try to get the bank notes."

"They aren't after the money, Chess!"

"Sh, not so loud, Ruth, they'll hear you."

Without warning, Ruth burst into uncontrollable laughter.

CHAPTER XXIII

EXPLANATIONS

"LIGHT the lamp!" Ruth commanded as soon as she could gain control of her voice.

The others stared at her in astonishment.

"But Ruth——" Chess started to protest.

"Don't worry, it's all right, Chess. Don't you know who it is out there in the bushes?"

"Who?"

"Helen and some one else. I recognized her dress when she stepped out from behind a tree."

"Helen! Are you sure?" Chess asked, still in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm as certain as I am of anything. Light the lamp!"

"All right, here goes!"

Chess felt in his pocket for a match, and after a minute's delay found one and touched it to the wick of the oil lamp. Ruth went boldly to the window and motioned. Chess, Markham and Tom watched her anxiously.

Almost instantly there was a shout from out-

side, and Helen Cameron ran across the clearing toward the house. Chess saw her coming, and jerked open the door.

"Helen!" he exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I wasn't going to miss all the excitement! So I just hopped into Bill Jones' old rattle-trap and came on out. It took us longer to arrive, but we got here."

As she spoke Bill Jones shambled cautiously into the room and was greeted by the young folks. At this moment, Helen turned and saw Tom for the first time. With one wild cry of joy she threw her arms about her twin's neck.

"Tommy! Tommy!" she repeated over and over.

"There, there, Helen!" Tom patted her back. "You do appreciate your old brother after all, don't you? Even if he does need a shave, a hair-cut—and a porterhouse steak."

"Tell me everything, Tom!"

"First, we're going to town," Ruth insisted. "We've started three times already. We were just leaving when you burst in upon us."

"Bill and I thought you were the robbers," Helen giggled. "We weren't taking any chances."

The group left the house, put out the light, and closed the door. Chess and Ruth helped Tom, for he was still very weak.

"It isn't very far to the car," Ruth told him encouragingly.

They reached the spot where they had left the roadsters. Tom and Jack Markham were to ride with Ruth. Helen said she would go with Chess.

"Bill can drive his own car," Helen said. In an undertone she added, "I declare, I never had such a jolty ride in all my life! I think some of my teeth are missing."

"Where's Markham?" Ruth asked suddenly. She had climbed into her roadster and Tom had seated himself beside her.

"Here he comes now," Chess observed. "Say, where have you been, Jack? We were about ready to send out a searching party after you."

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," the young aviator apologized. "I happened to see the wings of a dismembered airplane hidden among the trees, and I had to have a look at it. I'm coming back to-morrow when it's daylight and have another look."

"The plane those rascals used to make their get-away in, I suppose," Chess guessed.

The ride back to Cheslow was soon accomplished. Ruth insisted upon driving directly to the office of Dr. Davison, and while Tom was given a thorough medical examination, Chess and

Markham turned over the bank notes to the authorities.

"Si can't make out how he missed 'em," Chess chuckled, as he returned to the doctor's office to wait for Tom. "He's crushed!"

The door of the inner office opened and Dr. Davison came out with Tom. Ruth and her friends waited anxiously for the verdict.

"He's in good shape, considering everything he's gone through," the doctor reported. "I've given him something to help his cough. Take him home and feed the poor boy."

They drove straight to Cameron Hall. Jack Markham would have left the crowd, but Ruth and Helen insisted that he accompany them. Markham acquiesced willingly.

As soon as they reached Cameron Hall Ruth telephoned to the Red Mill and explained to her uncle briefly why she had been delayed.

"Tell them you won't be home to-night," Helen prompted her. "It's too late now to go back to the Red Mill, and by the time we've listened to the account of Tom's adventures, it will be long after midnight." So this message was added.

Ruth and Helen set about preparing "a square meal" for Tom, and as soon as he had had a hurried hot bath and had eaten, the entire group of young people went to the sitting room to hear the promised story. Although the hour was late,

Mr. Cameron insisted that Della, the nurse, wheel his chair out where he, too, could listen.

"I feel almost like a new man already," Tom said, and smiled as he took a seat on the davenport beside Ruth, and slipped his arm around her. "Well, I'll start at the beginning. I was worried about father, you know."

Mr. Cameron nodded understandingly.

"I went upstairs to go to bed. But I didn't go to sleep. Instead, I kept thinking about father. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that he needed a specialist. Dr. Davison had told me that he would be in his office late, making some tests in connection with a puzzling case, and I decided to consult him.

"I went out into the hall, but there was no light in Helen's room, so I knew she was asleep and didn't bother her. I just slipped quietly out of the house and to the garage for my blue roadster."

"Were you wearing a red sweater?" Chess interrupted.

"A red sweater? I believe I was."

"And a plaid cap?"

"Why, yes." Tom did not understand the question.

"Go on with your story," Ruth urged. "We'll explain about the cap and the sweater later."

"Well, I backed the car out without waking

any one in the house. I reached Cheslow, but I guess it was later than I thought. Anyway, Dr. Davison had left his office. I drove down to his house, but the lights were out and I decided that it wouldn't be decent to wake him up at such a late hour. So I drove back through town on my way home.

"The streets were deserted. As I passed the Farmers Savings Bank, I thought I heard a strange noise inside."

"The gang we rounded up to-night," Helen said, nodding.

"Three of the men were inside. The fourth man was stationed outside to give the alarm in case any one came near. Of course, I didn't know that until too late."

He rubbed his head, and for the first time Ruth and her friends noticed a hard bump.

"You were struck on the head?" Ruth gasped. "Oh, Tom, you might have been killed! And you didn't say a word about it!"

"It doesn't hurt much now, Ruth. Well, to go on with the story. I was suspicious, and stopped my roadster in front of the bank. I could hear the noise plainly then, and I thought I could see a dim light inside the bank. I got out of the car and went up and looked through a window."

"Trust Tom not to leave a mystery alone," Helen interposed.

"The lock of the door had been forced, and I slipped inside and hid in the shadow," Tom continued. "I recognized two of the men."

"The authorities will probably want you to identify them," Mr. Cameron observed.

"I can do it. One was Claude Hand. I don't know the name of the other fellow, but I've often seen him around Cheslow and can point him out.

"Suddenly I heard a noise behind me! I wheeled around just in time to see a big ruffian bearing down on me. He had something in his hand—I don't know what it was. Anyway, something struck me, and that's the last I remember for a long time."

Ruth pressed his hand.

"Then what happened?" Helen urged him on.

"When I recovered consciousness, I was bound hand and foot. I was in my own roadster, and those rascals were driving me somewhere. My sweater and cap were gone."

"You don't know where they went, do you?" Chess asked. "We found them in the garage. Rather, the detectives did."

"In the garage? Those scamps must have brought them here before they disposed of my roadster! No wonder folks around here thought I had robbed the bank!"

"There were some that didn't," Ruth said softly.

"They drove me to a field," Tom hurried on. "They tried to buy my silence, but I refused. They offered me a good share of the haul if I'd promise not to tell what I'd seen.

"As soon as they saw that it was no use to offer me money, they discussed plans for covering up their tracks. The first thing they did was to run my roadster into a ravine. I'm afraid I'll never run that car again, from the crash it made when it went over."

"I'm afraid you won't either!" Chess agreed. "Ruth and I found it. She's a wreck!"

"Well, I'm glad enough I wasn't in it. The men stood around, waiting for some one. Pretty soon an airplane came along and landed in the field. Two of the rascals took the money and got in the plane. The others lifted me in—I was still trussed up.

"We flew off, leaving two of the rascals standing in the field. I don't know what happened to them, as I didn't see them again for several days."

"They stayed right here in Cheslow," Helen informed her brother. "The nerve! I suppose they figured they would escape suspicion that way. And unless I'm mistaken, they helped to stir up

that story about Tom. They wanted it to appear that he was the guilty one."

"The aviator was a reckless driver and didn't seem to know too much about a plane. I didn't have any idea where we were going, but presently, I saw they were preparing to land. It looked like a dangerous place to me—trees on every side."

Markham nodded.

"Well, the aviator didn't make a skillful landing. We broke something—I don't know what. I heard them say it wouldn't be possible to get the plane into the air again. So they decided to dismember it and hide it among the trees.

"They took me back into the woods to that shack where you found me. The aviator left immediately and I never saw him again. He's the only one of the gang you haven't caught."

"We'll catch him," Markham declared. "We can send out his description and he'll turn up one of these days—probably at a flying field."

"They threw me down into that damp cellar, and there I stayed."

"They didn't keep you bound all the time?" Ruth asked.

"No, I couldn't have stood it if they had. But they didn't give me enough to eat. I didn't have any conception of passing time. I actually thought I'd been held a prisoner for a month at least."

"I don't wonder!" Helen sympathized.

"Sometimes I could hear them talking upstairs. This afternoon they came in and were quite excited. Heard them say something about an airplane landing in the field near the shack."

"That was Markham," Ruth put in. "You can thank him for locating your place of concealment."

"I guess I've explained everything now. Toward night, the scamps came down into the cellar and tied me up again and gagged me. They hid the money under the canvas. They had kept it there some of the time before—whenever they thought any one was approaching the shack."

"You were unconscious when we found you," Ruth told him.

"You missed out on the battle," Chess informed him. "After all, it wasn't so much. Those fellows were cowards at heart."

Presently Chess Copley and Jack Markham arose to go, after assuring Tom that they would see him the first thing in the morning.

"Don't slip out of town until I thank you properly for your help," Tom called after the young aviator as he left the house.

After the door closed behind the two young men, there was a long period of silence. Ruth, Helen and Mr. Cameron were thoughtful as they

considered the hardship and danger that Tom had gone through.

Ruth glanced at Tom and there was a tender expression on her face. Helen hastily got up from her chair and moved over to her father.

"I'll wheel you to your room," she said, half smiling. "We're all tired. Too, I have a sneaking notion that Ruth has something she wants to say to Tom."

"You're right, Helen. But it's something I can say in front of you."

She turned to face Tom, but suddenly her courage seemed to leave her. For perhaps the first time in her life, Ruth Fielding was self-conscious.

"Your story has made me do a lot of thinking," she began slowly. "I guess I didn't quite understand how much you meant to me." She faltered and could not go on, although she had not said the thing she had meant to say.

"Ruth, you mean you'll——" Tom stammered eagerly.

Deliberately, Ruth leaned forward and kissed him.

CHAPTER XXIV

RUTH'S PROMISE

"It seems almost too good to be true!" Helen Cameron declared happily. "I guess I'll have to pinch myself to realize that all our trouble is over—father well again and Tom back home!"

"Let me save you the trouble, Helen." Chess, who was seated beside her on the lawn at Cameron Hall, reached over and gave her a sly pinch.

Helen promptly boxed his ears.

"Oh, Helen, that was just a little love pinch!"

Ruth and Tom, who were also sitting under the shade trees, smiled indulgently at the antics. Since the night of the exciting adventures at the hut in the woods and the recovery of Tom, Ruth had been unusually quiet and wrapped in her own thoughts. She seemed more devoted to Tom than ever before and less willing to tease him.

"Ruth, you look so serious," Helen protested. "I'll venture you're thinking up a new plot for your next scenario!"

The girl of the Red Mill shook her head emphatically.

"I haven't given my work a serious thought since—since Tom disappeared. What's more, I don't intend to start another scenario—well, for a long time. I think I'll take a long rest."

"By the way, did you know the Farmers Savings Bank opened its doors this morning?" Chess asked.

"No!" Ruth was all interest. "I haven't been down to Cheslow all day."

"The return of the money made it possible. Then the directors got together and agreed to take up some bad paper—farm loans, you know. The examiner was satisfied and opened the bank this morning."

"I'm so glad!" Ruth declared. "Uncle Jabez has been worrying himself sick about his money. And Aunt Alvirah will be so happy."

"It means a lot to us, too," Helen added. "Father's investments have turned out better than he expected, and now that the bank trouble is fixed, I guess everything is all right."

"And Ruth can draw out her forty thousand dollars," Tom put in quietly. Good food and plenty of rest had strengthened the young man, and his cough had almost left him. He was the same old Tom, a trifle thinner, perhaps more

serious. "That means you can finance another picture," he said, looking down at her.

"I—suppose—so." Ruth's voice lacked enthusiasm.

"If you want a scenario plot, you won't have to hunt far," Chess took up the discussion. "Our adventures ought to make a thrilling picture! Truth is stranger than fiction, they say."

"It would make a wonderful picture! But you can't tempt me, Chess Copley. I don't feel in the mood for writing. I guess I'm just getting lazy."

"You? Lazy?" Helen laughed knowingly. "Oh, no, Ruthie Fielding, that isn't what's the matter with you!"

Ruth blushed and turned her face so that Tom could not see.

"I'd like to know *how* you know," she retorted.

Without waiting for a reply, she got up from the grass and, taking hold of Tom's hand, pulled him to his feet. Helen giggled.

"I made Ruth blush, and now she's going off and leave me!" Helen grinned impudently. "Why don't you take Tom down to the garden and show him the roses? Roses are so romantic!"

"Don't mind Helen," Tom laughed, holding tightly to Ruth's hand when she would have withdrawn it. "She's just my twin sister! Anyway,

I think she gets that way from too close association with Chess Copley!"

Hand in hand they walked slowly across the lawn. Silently, Chess and Helen watched them.

"I guess it's the beginning of the end," Helen sighed. "It took Ruth a long time to find out how much Tom really meant to her, but when she falls she falls hard."

"I wish something would happen to me," Chess grumbled. "Maybe then you, too, would appreciate a fellow."

"Why, Chess Copley, you know I've always appreciated you! Such a lovely disposition! Such eyes! Such noble actions! How could it be otherwise?"

Chess refused to enter into the spirit of the fun. His arm slipped around her waist, and he gazed soberly into her eyes.

"Helen, why can't we get married? We've been engaged a long time."

The smile faded from Helen's face.

"I do love you, Chess. But we can't be married right away. Father isn't very strong, and he needs me at home. Some day——" Her voice trailed off.

In the garden, Ruth and Tom had found seats on a stone bench near the rose arbor. Ruth picked up a tiny pebble and skipped it into the lily pool. She seemed ill at ease. There was something she

wanted to say, yet she could not find the words.

"What was it you wanted to tell me that day in California when you were taking the train for the East?" she asked.

It was not what she had intended to say.

"I hope you haven't worried about that, Ruth. It wasn't anything important."

"I didn't exactly worry, Tom. I'll admit I wondered if you referred to money matters—the Fielding Film Company."

"No, it wasn't that. Your company is in good shape. I can raise some money for you in a few days if you need it."

"I don't need it, Tom. I can meet my current expenses with my prize money. I'm not eager to begin another picture."

Tom glanced down at her tenderly. He started to say something, hesitated, then went on.

"What I started to tell you that day at the railway station was that I——" he stammered. "Well, it was just this, Ruth. If you ever feel that you care more about me than you do your work—well, I'll be waiting."

"Oh, Tommy," Ruth turned happy eyes upon him, "I've been trying to tell you for several days. I do care more for you than for my work. I care more for you than for anything else in the world! I guess I didn't realize it until after you disappeared and I thought I'd never see you again."

Tom stared at her an instant, almost in disbelief. Then he caught her in his arms and kissed her. He released her, and his face became sober.

"That's just the trouble, Ruth."

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"You're carried away by sympathy. You worried a lot while I was away."

"I'm not carried away by sympathy. I've always known I loved you, but I wasn't quite willing to give up my work. Now I realize that my work means nothing without you."

"Will you prove it?" Tom demanded eagerly. "Will you marry me to-morrow?"

"Well, not to-morrow, goose! Because I must get my clothes ready and I'll want a real wedding, with all my old college chums back to see me married. But I don't want to make you wait too long, because you've been so patient. Perhaps in a month——"

She never finished the sentence, nor did she care to.

"Let's go back to the house and tell Helen and Chess the news," Ruth suggested presently. "I shouldn't be surprised if Helen suspects already."

They left the bench and arm in arm walked back to the spot where they had left the others. Helen and Chess had disappeared, but almost immediately they were sighted on the porch.

"There's some one with them," Tom observed.

"It looks like Markham. I want to see him."

"He's been around only once since the night we captured the bank robbers. I haven't had a chance to really thank him for helping us. I declare, he's almost as modest as Fred Orman."

They came up to the porch and greeted the young aviator cordially.

"He's just brought us more news," Helen informed the newcomers quickly. "You remember that one member of the gang escaped. Well, that aviator was caught this morning at Chicago!"

"They're sending him back here," Jack Markham added.

"That finishes the gang," Chess announced, with satisfaction. "The authorities certainly didn't let any moss grow under their feet when it came to sentencing those other rascals."

"The sheriff took them away early this morning, and as soon as the fifth man can be brought to trial, he'll land in prison too," Markham added.

Tom extended his hand to the young aviator.

"I want to thank you again. It meant a lot to me—more than you realize." He glanced at Ruth, who returned his smile.

Tom had already offered Jack Markham a generous remuneration, but he had refused the money and had taken only the sum originally offered him for his work.

"I came to say good-by," he told the group on the porch.

"You aren't leaving yet, are you?" Chess questioned. He had taken a liking to the young man and was loath to see him leave.

Markham reached down in his pocket and brought out a sheet of paper.

"This telegram came this morning. The Newell Picture Company has offered me a temporary position. They're making a new picture, and I'm to do a few stunts for them. I'm afraid I must take off within a few hours."

"We'll be sorry to see you leave," Ruth said regretfully. She hesitated, then blurted out the news. "You see, we're planning for a wedding soon—Tom and I—and we'd like to have you here for it."

"Ruth Fielding!" Helen pounced upon her, and gave her a hearty squeeze and a kiss. "Well, I'll admit when I saw you head for the rose garden, I suspected as much!"

Chess Copley and Jack Markham were not backward in offering congratulations.

"I'm sorry I can't wait," the aviator told them, as he turned to leave. "I'd like to be present at your wedding." He flashed a smile. "Perhaps you'll see me again—before very long!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE SKY WRITER

" 'SOMETHING old and something new,
Something borrowed, something blue.'

"I tell you, girls, that's what a lucky bride should wear. Don't forget I went through this once myself!"

"Heavy, do stop jiggling the bed, or you'll break it! I'm sure that wouldn't be a lucky sign for Ruth on her wedding day!"

Helen Cameron called out the advice gayly, and immediately there was a chorus of laughter at the expense of the plump girl who was seated on the bed.

Mrs. Henri Marchand, ever known to her schoolmates of Ardmore College as "Heavy" Jennie Stone, had been the first of the old set to embark upon the sea of matrimony. Literally as well as figuratively, Jennie had set sail, for she had gone with her husband to France to live and had come over with him to America less than a

week before this day—the one which had been named for Ruth Fielding's wedding.

"Heavy has managed to keep her girlish figure," Ann Hicks, the ranch girl, chuckled.

"Keep it?" groaned Jennie good-naturedly. "I've doubled it!"

"Do quiet down," Nettie Parsons of Louisiana begged. "A bride's attendants should have more dignity. Ruth will wish she had never invited us to her wedding—we sort of lower the tone."

Madge Steele and Mary Cox both laughed.

"She knew us of old, Nettie," declared Mary. "She should never have risked inviting us to her wedding."

Ruth's old college friends had gathered in her room for a last talk with her before the ceremony, which was to take place at the big Union Church of Cheslow. On this happy occasion Ruth had done but little of the talking.

"I don't care how much noise Heavy makes," the bride declared without a suggestion of irritation. "This is the happiest time of my life, and I want everybody to be gay."

There was a sudden, joyous pealing of an organ. Outside the Union Church idlers had halted for a glimpse of the bride at the conclusion of the ceremony. A broad canopy stretched from

the church door to the street curb, and under this the wedding party had passed.

Almost before she realized it, Ruth Fielding was walking slowly down the aisle to the elaborately decorated altar. She was radiant, but oblivious of the admiring eyes that were focused upon her. Her beauty was enhanced by a straight, simple gown of white satin, court train of rose point lace, and tulle veil fastened back with orange blossoms. She carried a bride's bouquet of gardenias, orchids and lilies of the valley, Tom's gift to her.

It seemed unreal, almost too good to be true. Yet, it was not a dream, Ruth told herself. Tom was waiting for her at the altar.

The ushers, walking two by two, stepping in time with the stately music, led the way down the aisle. After them came Jennie Stone and Ann Hicks, dressed exactly alike in gowns of pale green georgette and picture hats.

Helen Cameron, as the maid of honor, was lovely in a dress of white chiffon and Brussels lace. Following her were the little flower-girls who scattered handfuls of rose petals in the bride's pathway.

Ruth came last, leaning upon the right arm of Uncle Jabez Potter, who was to give her away in marriage. Arrayed in a "store suit" and im-

maculately scrubbed and brushed, the miller looked flatteringly unlike his usual self.

As Ruth approached the altar, Tom advanced to meet her. Chess Copley, the best man, took his place at the side of the bridegroom. Although both Tom and Chess were handsome in their neatly cut suits, attention centered not upon them but upon the bride.

At the proper moment Chess took the wedding ring from his pocket and handed it to Tom, who in turn placed it on Ruth's finger.

The ceremony concluded, Ruth received Tom's kiss—for which many previous rehearsals had been necessary!

On the way down the aisle on the arm of her husband, Ruth caught sight of Aunt Alvirah. Unconscious of everything save the tears that shone in the old lady's eyes, she paused and gave her a kiss.

"I'll be lonesome without you, my pretty," Aunt Alvirah said softly. "But I know you'll be happy."

Ruth gave her an extra squeeze of the hand and passed on down the aisle and outside to the waiting automobile which was to whisk the wedding party back to the Red Mill for the reception.

Never had the old home seemed more dear, more picturesque, Ruth told herself. The grounds had been improved by a landscape gar-

dener from the city, and for once in his life Uncle Jabez Potter had not counted the cost. Although Aunt Alvirah had baked the wedding cake with her own hands, a caterer had attended to all other details of the feast.

There had been a mad scramble for Ruth's bouquet, but Helen had come out victorious, much to the satisfaction of Chess Copley.

Ruth and Tom received their friends on the lawn under the shade trees. The restraint which had fallen upon every one during the ceremony at the church had slipped away. Now there was a constant murmur of happy, excited voices. Many old friends from Cheslow and elsewhere pressed forward, eager to congratulate Tom and wish Ruth happiness.

Ruth and Tom had sent Mr. Hammond, president of the Alectrion Film Corporation, an invitation to the wedding as a courtesy, never dreaming that he would make the long trip to Cheslow to attend the ceremony. But Mr. Hammond had arrived for the wedding, and he, too, offered his congratulations.

"When are you going back to the movies?" he asked Ruth kindly. "We can't allow you to slip away forever, you know."

Ruth flashed him a happy smile and clung more tightly to the arm of her husband.

"Not until Tom says I may," she answered.

"The moving picture world won't entirely lose Ruth," Tom promised. "I've agreed that in the film world she is to keep her own name, as dozens of others are doing."

"That's sensible," Mr. Hammond said approvingly.

Uncle Jabez, who since the recovery of his money was more firmly than ever convinced that "Niece Ruth was all right," beamed upon the guests, as did Aunt Alvirah Boggs. Mr. Cameron, who had witnessed the wedding in a wheel chair, was closely attended by Helen.

"Ruth, Heavy's killing herself!" Ann Hicks, regardless of the dignity of the occasion, hurried across the lawn to the bride.

"What is she up to now?" Ruth asked, although she guessed the answer.

"She's simply gorging food!"

"I was prepared for Heavy's appetite," Ruth laughed. "We ordered double on her account."

"What's this they're saying about me?" Jennie crossed over to the group. "Ruth, don't believe a word of it!"

"Of course not, Jennie," Ruth soothingly replied.

"I suppose I did eat a trifle more than usual," the plump girl admitted. "You see, this French food I've been getting is wonderful in its way—still, when I'm exposed to genuine American deli-

cacies, I can't resist. You understand, Ruth?"

"I didn't live with you at Briarwood Hall and Ardmore College without learning a few of your —well, shall I say idiosyncrasies?"

"Ouch! Girls, she's trying to flabbergast me with big words. I suppose she means I'm just odd!"

Mary Cox, who had been standing near while the banter went on, had turned her back upon the group and was looking upward toward the sky. Always observing, she had noticed something that the others had not seen.

"An airplane," she announced. "It's coming near, too."

Immediately all eyes were turned to the sky.

"Seems to be flying low, and right toward the Red Mill," Chess Copley observed.

Ruth and Tom exchanged glances.

"Do you suppose——" Ruth began.

Tom nodded. Chess and Helen apparently had been struck with the same thought.

"I'll venture it's Jack Markham!" Chess guessed.

"I'm sure you're right," Ruth agreed.

"I don't believe he's going to land," Helen announced in disapointment. "Why, what in the world is he up to?"

As she spoke, a cloud of smoke issued from

the rear end of the plane. There was a gasp of alarm from the group on the lawn.

"The plane's on fire!" Nettie Parsons cried.

"No," Tom announced quickly. "It couldn't be on fire, because the aviator is waving his hand."

The airplane was now directly over the Red Mill, and flying low enough for Ruth and her friends to make out that the pilot was indeed Jack Markham.

Ruth and the others waved their own handkerchiefs in reply to the salute.

"He's beginning to do stunts!" Helen observed.

There was a moment of silence as the group on the lawn watched the peculiar antics of the plane.

"I know!" Tom suddenly explained. "He's writing a message in the sky!"

Even as the young man spoke, it became apparent to the others that such was the case. Slowly, one smoke-letter at a time, the message was written. Completed, it read:

Best Wishes

"Best Wishes," Helen read aloud. "Why, it's Markham's way of congratulating Ruth and Tom! How perfectly original!"

"I hope he lands," Nettie Parsons said. "I'd

like to meet this aviator every one has been telling me about."

But Jack Markham did not head for the landing field near the Red Mill. Instead, he circled the grounds three times, waved his hand, and flew into the east. A minute more, and his plane was a mere speck in the sky.

"Oh, how disappointing," Helen sighed.

"I wonder why he didn't stop?" Ann Hicks asked curiously.

"Jack Markham is more afraid of people than he is of danger," Ruth returned, with a smile. "It's his way of saying good-by without embarrassment. I really think it's an altogether artistic way," she finished quietly.

For a half hour longer the gayety continued. Then Ruth slipped to her own room to change into a neat traveling suit.

"I think I'll go with her and help pick the rice out of her hair." Upon this pretext Helen Cameron also escaped the crowd and followed Ruth into the house.

"It won't be long until all the Ardmore College girls will be married," Helen sighed, as she aided Ruth to change her costume.

"Don't take it so seriously, dear." Ruth gave her a last farewell kiss. "Mark my words, Helen Cameron. You'll be the next to go!"

Ruth and Helen returned to the lawn. Tom

turned to help his bride into the new roadster which had taken the place of the one that had been smashed in the ravine. Ruth's friends gathered about the automobile.

Aunt Alvirah wiped the tears from her eyes. Ruth put her arms about her and whispered:

"Don't cry, Aunt Alvirah. You're not really losing me. I'll come back to the Red Mill often."

Ruth was helped into the roadster. Tom started the engine.

"We shouldn't let them escape without finding out where they're going for the honeymoon!" Ann Hicks shouted.

"It's a secret!" Tom called back as he threw in the clutch.

"Throw the rice!" went up the cry.

The roadster spurted forward, and Ruth and Tom avoided the shower. They looked back and waved. Then, as the car reached the main road, Tom's hand left the wheel and Ruth's face was turned to his.

"The fade-out," Helen whispered.

The silence was broken by Ann Hicks, who softly added the title lines:

" 'And they rode away, hand in hand, into the sunset.' "

THE END

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